

I CAN HEAR YOU WRITING:

Reflections on Voice and Writing

by

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ABSTRACT

Written in the form of a narrative, this thesis explores the phenomenon of voice in writing, and what the development of an awareness of the multiplicity of voices while writing and reading can mean for language learners. This thesis is also a personal reflection of depression, and a recollection of individual, family and life events. One chapter takes the form of a unified narrative, while another presents anecdotal recollections. It is, in this sense, an exploration of voices through an analysis of available academic and public writing, and a personal inquiry into how the concept of voices in writing has affected my development as an individual and as a writer.

The first section reviews some of the academic and public literature on writing and voice, and reveals that early writing on the issue of voice reflected a monolithic theory of voice. That is, that there is one voice that as writers we must find within ourselves, or there is a voice of the author that we must seek out. However, views of the multiplicity of voices in writing are increasingly common. While philosophical tradition since Plato has mistrusted writing and viewed it as secondary to speech, philosophy has nevertheless employed writing to further its own inquiries. Re/viewing the issue of voice in writing may be one way to deal with this long-standing schism between speech and writing.

There is a need to further problematize the field of writing, not searching for ways to simplify the process but seeking ways to celebrate the inherent complexity, ambiguity, and paradoxical nature of writing. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the need to seriously consider the significance of voices in writing in first and second language instruction.

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Acknowledgements

Few myths are as enduring as that of the solitary writer, scrawling away in isolation. In my case, without the aid of those who gave their support to this project, there would have been no thesis at all. Early on, I decided to share a chapter with one such supporter. When she finished I asked, "So, what do you think?" She answered, "I can hear you writing."

As teachers and students, writers and readers, we must be prepared for startling, unexpected gifts: turns of phrase, vocalized half thoughts, observations, comments, suggestions, anecdotes, jokes, stories, excerpts from life's discourse, and the still smoking aroma of freshly formed words eager to reach a reader. I trust other readers will also be able to hear and understand.

It is often said that good writers take the time each day to sit down and write when they can. Let me add that writing *where you can* is as important as *when you can*. This book was written in a myriad of places: at my desk, in my chair, on the couch, in bed, on the floor, in the bathroom, in public and university libraries, in my car, on the bus, on a plane, at the doctor's office, at the beach, in McDonald's, Starbucks, in two apartments, on vacation, while working, in Canada and the United States, at sea level and high up on a mountain, on scraps of paper or direct to hard disk.

Looking back at my journey through UBC I have a few folks I'd like to acknowledge. Professor Ken Reeder, unfailingly cheerful and supportive, saw me through my first year in LANE; later, Professor Carl Leggo became my supervisor and coach. Carl's thoughtful comments and suggestions contributed greatly to my ideas about voice and to this thesis; he also found a lot of spelling mistakes. Hats off to the members of my committee, Professors Jim Anderson and Renee Norman, and to Professors Ted Aoki, Patricia Duff, and Rick Berwick. I'd also like to thank Dr. R.A. Harpur, Dr. Les Leader, and Dr. Oliver Robinow. I am grateful to Hilary Tait for assistance in proofreading (thanks for the title!), and to Nancy Gibbs and Joel Stevenson.

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Chapter One

The World of Voices

Introduction

Like it or not, we live in a world of voices. They are pervasive, ubiquitous, so common as to be often unheard or ignored. Voices tell us stories, and can reflect the sex, age, education, experience, emotion, attitude and articulateness of the speaker. A particular dialect or accent may reveal the region of origin or country of birth. If children do not begin speaking on time we become concerned and send them off to speech therapists or child psychologists. If children are neglected or abused, like the young California woman named Genie profiled in Rymer (1993), their voices will develop striking abnormalities, or not at all. So too, if we have some speech impediment, a stutter, a lisp, or perhaps a slurring of words, it is thought (incorrectly) to reflect poorly on our intelligence and personal identity. Locke (1998) writes that voice "moves and behaves with us, reflecting where we've been, are at the moment, and might be seeking to go in the future. It adorns and dogs each of our articulate steps" (p. 24). In our culture, fluent speech is thought to correspond with fluent thought, to speak well a cherished skill. The mouth (lips, teeth, and tongue), the entire oral cavity, is a sensual orifice. We desire red lips, fresh breath and laser-whitened teeth. The human voice remains our unique signature, our oral identity to the world. We are, in some ways, perceived by the manner in which we speak; how and what we say inextricably bound to our being. Johnson (1997) notes that voice brings us nearer to the self, and "is perceived as closer to the inner 'truth' of individual consciousness" (p. 4). Medically, the production of vocal sound is well understood, as detailed in Stacey (1999):

Our vocal chords are two fibrous sheets of tissue in the larynx (voice box) that are responsible for voice production. Most of the time, the vocal chords lie apart, forming a v-shaped opening called the glottis through which air is breathed. Vocal sounds are produced when the chords tighten, close and vibrate as air expelled from the lungs passes between them. Our vocal chords work very hard. They vibrate 200 times a second in a woman with a normally pitched voice, 100 to 125 times a second in a man with a normally pitched voice and 500 times per second in children.

(p. B6)

But what is meant by voice when we write and read? When we live or are living? Is it our own internal generic narrator or the author's voice we hear? God or one of the angels? The voice of the CBC? What happens to our own voices as we grow, change, suffer, win or lose, live or die? Does writing have a real place in our lives, or is it, sadly, just another available means of communication?

These thoughts have rattled through my mind for many years, and it was in the context of further schooling at the graduate level, and a depressive episode now mercifully in remission, that these thoughts and questions surfaced again with renewed urgency. During this struggle I witnessed my own voice abandon me, "the lamentable near disappearance of my voice," as Styron (1990) has remarked. My mind swirled with frequently negative and often dangerous eddies of thought; my voice, so much a part of my identity, could only manage something near strained muteness. Years earlier, I had worked in radio at the CHUM stations 980 CKGM and 980 Hits in Montreal, and later at 89.5 Alpha FM, a contemporary pop music station in Kyoto, Japan, where I spoke English and Japanese on the air. My voice had been my livelihood, my way of making it through this world, closely linked to who I was and what I did. I could not countenance its absence.

Who was I now? Where was I now? Where was Andrew Harry Quinn, fourth born preacher's son? Without my voice, I was not myself. As my own voice faded, like the receding tide exposing the patterned muddy flats, I became more of a recluse, unable to rely on the familiar comfort and company of my own voice which had suddenly turned slow, emotional, cryptic, reticent, ghostly, an experience I would not wish on anyone. Yes, life in this world is better for me now, a new, stronger voice emerging, but I have been left with an unwavering vigilance, monitoring myself for vocal deterioration, or urgent emotional signs of an impending downward spiral.

This narrative thesis will explore the meanings of voices in writing, the pedagogical and personal consequences of awareness of these varying voices, what loss and gain of voice can mean, and how attention to issues of voice may play a role in the way teachers and students think about learning to write in a second language. It may be helpful for the reader to understand what this thesis is not: It is not intended as a self-help narrative, for depressives, writers or teachers, although in the back of my mind I know that it *wants* to be. If it is a self-help book, then it is in that way intended to heal and help me, or anyone else in whom this tale might find resonance. Consequently, this thesis is not a purely academic tome, but should fulfill the requirements for graduation from the University of British Columbia. However, I hope it to be so much more. Through examination of available research, carefully selected excerpts from my own and other's writing, and personal reflection, I will strive to make some sense of the territory of voice in writing, if not mapping the terrain then at least sketching the surface so that others may follow. This imagined map is not some two dimensional accordion nightmare, with more lines than a Shakespearean

tragedy. It's one of those bird's eye view types, having what cartographers call *perspective*. I appreciate maps where the mountains and buildings seem to rise off the page. Perspective, as it is commonly understood, presents objects as seen from one location. However, through this writing I will work to provide perspectives on voice and writing from several vantage points.

No map will satisfy everyone, as we all perceive and experience the terrain differently, and our journeys are not the same. And so I invite the reader to assemble a way of understanding that is personally most helpful and enlightening. Reading is a generative activity, a communal act of challenging, confirming, constructing, discovering, searching for and sharing meanings, knowledge, and whatever truths can be agreed upon, but it is also one that occurs in a very individual manner. Manguel (1996) writes that "it is the reader who grants or recognizes in an object, place or event a certain possible readability; it is the reader who must attribute meaning to a system of signs, and then decipher it" (p. 7). We read from the beginning, the middle, or the end, skipping, scanning, searching, summarizing, reflecting, being sucked into a text, suddenly flipping to the end to see where we will be taken, or occasionally returning to the start because we have lost our way.

The word exploratory also comes to mind with regard to the writing of this text, especially in how closely the word, for me anyway, resembles or sounds like two words: *explore* and *story*. Thus, I will proceed, without trying to sound too pompous or introspectively sensitive, with an eye but especially an ear to exploring the story, the discourse, and the space where voices dwell. Considered organically, I will enter into or move into that space where voices live. There is an academic trail that will be taken, but just as importantly there is a personal

path to be traversed. I will explore both paths, seeing where they meet and diverge, trying to make some sense of the territory.

Within the generative space of voice, I do not wish to objectify my own inquiry, but echo Low (1999) who sees her work as "positioned in the midst of life" (p. 296). As such, this thesis is also an autobiographical reflection, positioned in the midst of my life, a personal narrative of my own struggle with notions and realities of voice. As educators, we must never underestimate the power of the personal narrative in and out of the classroom. Ours is a society where public confession of private matters has become commonplace. Nevertheless, for the student writer, exposing the private in an educational context has many risks, but can also be a valuable learning experience. Tobin (1996) reminds us that "since it is so often the central site of conflict, confession, and catharsis, the personal narrative gives us a unique opportunity to help students negotiate the borderlands between home and school, past and present, self and other" (p. 168). For first and second language writers, the personal narrative has a real, powerful, and necessary place in the writing classroom, even for those who consider writing an esoteric or eccentric activity.

I have always wanted to be a writer, or at least always wanted to write. Growing up in New Brunswick on the east coast of Canada, writing was not an activity or profession that warranted serious consideration for most boys. Provincially, there were a few writers who were, as an English professor later quipped, "world famous all over New Brunswick": Bliss Carmen, Alden Nowlan, David Adams Richards, Stewart Maclean and others I'm sure I've forgotten. Several journalists attracted my attention: feature writer David Foster, and a columnist who spent a few years at *The Evening-Times Globe*, Robert Ashe. One of

the senior editors on that paper, Helmer Berman, would often write erudite reviews of concerts and artsy events. I can't clearly remember if my friends and I ever broached the subject of becoming a writer, but it seems likely I would have kept such a ridiculous idea to myself. Besides, there were subtle reminders from teachers and other adults that when we got out into the "real world" we would be stricken with a sudden awareness of the unpleasantness and morbid truth of life bearing down upon us, and thus ought to seek a "real" job, preferably unionized, to ensure safe passage through adulthood. 'Writer' never got mentioned.

Nevertheless, I was drawn to writing because of the sound the stories made in my head, the actual audible voices, and the idea of creating a text that might contain and nourish my voices, and that might be heard by others.

Manguel (1996) recalls that moment he first heard those voices:

Then one day, from the window of a car (the destination of that journey is now forgotten), I saw a billboard by the side of the road. The sight could not have lasted very long; perhaps the car stopped for a moment, perhaps it just slowed down long enough for me to see, large and looming, shapes similar to those in my book, but shapes that I had never seen before. And yet, all of a sudden, I knew what they were; I heard them in my head, they metamorphosed from black lines and white spaces into a solid, sonorous, meaningful reality...It was like acquiring an entirely new sense, so that now certain things no longer consisted merely of what my eyes could see, my ears could hear, my tongue could taste, my nose could smell, my fingers could feel, but of what my whole body could decipher, translate, give voice to, read.

(p. 6)

It is important to recollect the very first voices we hear: our mother or father, our brothers and sisters, a friend, even a doctor or nurse. As infants, we long listen before we can really use voice to be understood. We try to interpret

and give meaning to infant voices. Along with those human voices, there are the multiple voices of writing we hear when first learning to read.

When I began this thesis, I observed that teachers in training are a rich source of untapped, and unheard, voices and stories, yet often the beginning instructor does not feel comfortable vocalizing those stories of life, and has rarely been given an opportunity to speak about his or her own life and texts. Noddings (1994) notes that "teachers' personal stories can also be vital; that is, they can help students to explore existential and metaphysical questions..." (p. 356). Of course, inviting discussion on such issues can be difficult, so it is not surprising that we, as teachers, are somewhat reluctant to open our classroom to the multiple voices in our midst. It is safer to teach from and within the curriculum, and to develop the academic voice; the voice of research, science, reporting, observing, nurturing the techno-scientific discourse of post-modernity. However, as Jardine (1992) has strongly suggested, this kind of technical-scientific discourse forecloses inquiry, "it longs for a world in which the Word no longer lives, a world in which the droning silence of objective presentability finally holds sway over human life. The difficult nature of human life will be solved" (p. 118). This kind of discourse seeks the last word, the final say, effectively closing the inquiry, ignoring or avoiding the ambiguity of life, failing to give it voice. Far better, Jardine continues, is a hermeneutical approach which "is concerned with the ambiguous nature of life itself. It does not desire to render such ambiguity objectively presentable (as if the ambiguity of life were something to dispel, some 'error in the system' that needed correction) but rather to attend to it, to give it a voice" (p. 119).

The discordant voices of young men and women, their personal voices, are often relegated to correspondence, e-mail, and diaries. If these voices are welcomed in the classroom, there is often a distinct uneasiness on the part of the writer, a feeling of not wanting to tell or reveal too much. The reader, too, often feels squeamish, uncomfortable with such personal prose, some of which may border on what Elbow (1999) calls *private writing*. Elbow suggests that this kind of writing, according to the viewpoint expressed by social constructionists and cultural studies, may not be truly private at all, "because everything that anyone writes is deeply constructed by ideas or discourses outside the mind of the writer" (p. 140). Before we accept this viewpoint, we must be reminded that the voices we are encouraging our students to have are their *own*, distinct and unique, certainly part of cultural ideas and discourses, but brought to life through the writer's own personality and ideas.

So this thesis is about giving voice to *my* story, the good, the bad, and the ugly, in a way that I trust will encourage other teachers to give voice to their own experience. As language teachers we need to first nurture and cultivate our own voices, to be aware of the limits and risks involved, so we can more easily and wisely help our students to find and acknowledge their own voices.

However, like other activities in life, there is an appropriate time and place. This narrative reflects upon ideas that are intended for an adult group of writers, but teachers in Junior and Senior high school may also find them useful. Every teacher has his or her own group of students, and what works for one group may not work for another. Special groups of writers, such as recent immigrants, children, and adolescents, may not find this kind of writing easy or safe to do. During the writing of this thesis, with just such concerns in mind, I

found myself going back and removing portions of the text that, on second or third reading, I felt were too revealing, prose that I did not wish others to see. One of the dangers in writing autobiographical narratives is that they can become overly self indulgent and intimate, and years later the writer may wish the words had not been shared. Deciding how much to say, when, and where to say it is a difficult task, one that each teacher and student must ultimately decide for themselves, working with the assigned curriculum and among the unequal power relations of the classroom.

Throughout this text I will introduce stories from my own life, such as it was and such as it is. Some texts were written purely to explore the pleasure of the text, the sensuality of words, conjuring images, remembering. Other texts appeared in the context of, or as a requirement for, a course. Yet I do not believe that these pedagogically-conceived texts are merely "filler" intended to generate high marks and to get me to a place where I have the time to write seriously; they are what I *really* write. What is astounding for me is that I've obviously been waiting (and wanting) to write this thesis for a long time. I still have a weekly writing journal from Grade Seven in 1974, and almost every assignment, essay, paper, story, and missive that I have ever written since that time. I felt a strong compulsion to preserve these texts, yet I could not understand the reason for my obsession. I think now I'm beginning to know why.

The Pleasure of the Text

Writing about or describing voice is a different experience from hearing it for yourself, but I believe that for the first or second language student an awareness of voice can make reading and writing more enjoyable and successful,

and is at least as important as approaching a text from a grammatical, lexical, or organizational perspective. Looking back on this sentence, it seems odd that I chose the word enjoyable, because as educators we tend to shy away from the sensual and promote the practical. Write for grades, for marks, to pass, to prepare for the future, for provincial exams, to 'improve' oneself, and because it is commanded and required of you.

Of all the reasons educators have presented as motivation for reading or writing, the actual pleasure and sensuality of the text seem to be most remote from their minds. We are suspicious of textual pleasure, and take steps to ensure that literacy skills are the focus. Mere enjoyment of a text is not enough, at least not sufficient for most classrooms. In the same way, the teaching of writing can be so technical, so sequenced and programmed, it is a wonder, once graduation has been achieved, that anyone enjoys writing. Few people seem to write as a hobby. Engaging in reading or writing for practical purposes is lauded and encouraged; pleasure reading or writing is seen as secondary, an activity less deserving of praise or engagement. Yet Barthes (1975) spoke of the mysterious pleasure, that bliss:

If I read this sentence, this story, or this word with pleasure, it is because they were written in pleasure (such pleasure does not contradict the writer's complaints). But the opposite? Does writing in pleasure guarantee--guarantee me, the writer--my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out this reader (must "cruise" him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created.

(p. 4)

How might we encourage students to explore the site of bliss? Perhaps we could suggest students bring in a piece of writing--their own or another's--that has brought them to the place of bliss. It could be anything written: a label, a love

letter, a newspaper, instructions, a portion of a play, novel, or short story, even something blown up against a telephone pole. Any found text that brought to a student a glimmer of bliss. As students share this site of bliss with others, they may find their own voices and hear other's. It is my hope--yet *hope* being such a crying, urging, plaintiff word--that my research and reflection will speak for itself, in whatever voices they find, that a site of bliss will be created, and the pleasure, bountiful or not, will be ours to share.

Remembering Voices

I have always been interested in reading and writing, at least ever since I could read *Dr. Seuss* or *How and Why Wonder Books*. I vaguely remember some basal readers of the Dick and Jane variety that we were required to read in school, and at home there was always something to read. Whose voice was I hearing within these texts? The voice of staff writers? The voice of science? My own maturing voice inside my head? My parents had a lot of books around, including a shelf of thick volumes by Winston Churchill such as *The History of the English Speaking Peoples* or *Their Finest Hour*. Growing up, that early part of the century when my father was young seemed at times more real than present day. The world was at war against facisism. Hitler had to be stopped. Volunteering at eighteen, my father had been a flight engineer on Royal Canadian Air Force Lancaster bombers. He was stationed in the north of England, in Middleton/St.George, a member of 428 Ghost squadron. The Lancaster was a large aircraft, bristling with turrets, huge tail fins, with a wing span of over one hundred feet. It was capable of carrying a payload of up to 12000 pounds--the largest capacity of any allied bomber in World War II. According to Radell &

Vines (1993), the Lancaster "became the most successful RAF bomber of the war, having a superior performance in range, height, speed and bomb carrying ability" (p. 15). Ghost squadron had dropped bombs on a variety of targets, including factories, troop concentrations, U-Boat pens, anything of military significance. My father had kept a few of the flight books at war's end, which contained all sorts of information about bomb loads, targets, fuel capacities. He had really been there. I remember looking at them and thinking that fifty years after the war, his handwriting had remained largely the same. I would always imagine my father sitting in that huge aircraft, those four deafening, mufflerless Rolls-Royce Merlin engines droning on through the night, the crew wondering if they would return or be shot down. It was cold, noisy, and dangerous. Many crews didn't make it back, but my father and his crew always returned. After 17 bombing missions over Germany, each often over 20 hours out and back, my father's hearing had been damaged, and continued to deteriorate as he grew older, so much so that he would often not notice when I opened his study door to watch him compose a sermon. He was very sensitive to certain sounds; the din of dishes being clanked together made him sick. On Sunday mornings I would always be there in the pew with my mother and we would listen to my father's sermons, listening to his powerful voice. As a boy I'd had the usual fantasies of astronaut or fighter pilot, but sitting there in that pew one day I decided that I would make my way through this world using what God had given me: my writing talents and my voice.

I don't recall writing much in the younger grades, but I suppose I did. My first memory of writing is in Grade 7 at Lorne Junior High School, where I had a

wonderful English teacher named Mr. King. He was a young fellow, newly married, tall and handsome with red hair, glasses, and a beard, his voice even and strong. His idea of writing was to have each of us write something in a journal each week. One week I wrote about my dachshund Max:

To teach your dog to stay tell him to stay then gradually back off, if he follows you repeat the process again. He will soon get the hang of it. The lessons should not be too long otherwise he will lose this interest. To sit, say the command 'sit' then push down on his rump then he will be in the sitting position. He must be standing when you say the command 'sit'.

We were required to write a page and a half. It didn't seem to matter what we wrote--just as long as we filled the space. We didn't get to read each other's work, but sometimes I'd sneak a peak at other kid's writing. Colleen had beautiful handwriting which I had trouble reading because she was so beautiful herself. I'd always liked skinny girls. I finally got the nerve to ask her out but I knew I didn't have a chance. "I'd go out with you," she said sweetly, "but my boyfriend might beat you up." She always had such a nice smile. Another student, possibly Colleen's boyfriend, hated writing in the journal so much he wrote a page and a half of "fuck you fuck you fuck..." Peering at this text, I saw that Mr. King still gave him a check mark, which I thought was fair. It was still writing. Over the year my own journal grew thick with stories I wrote at home, initially at the kitchen table under my mother's supervision. I still can hear her screaming at me for all the mistakes I'd make: spelling, grammar, punctuation, but mostly spelling. She was not very patient early on. Mr. King always gave me a hearty check mark and an occasional very good or good. I still have that journal with me. By being encouraged to write in school I discovered I could write, or at

least enjoyed the experience. My grammar and punctuation have improved. My spelling isn't much better than it was. But at least my mom has stopped screaming.

Time passed. I grew up, grew older, reading whatever was available, and there was plenty. Books and magazines were everywhere. We had stacks of yellow-jacketed *National Geographics* around the house and in the attic, with a steady supply of shiny new ones coming once a month. *Reader's Digest* was around, along with *MacLean's*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Evening Times-Globe*. I read Nancy Drew mysteries, the Hardy Boys, detoured through comic books (I liked Archie and Friends), numerous school readers and texts, eventually discovering Farley Mowat, J.D. Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, Franz Kafka, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Charles Dickens, John Updike, John McPhee, Calvin Trillin, Tobias Wolff, Stephen J. Gould, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Witold Rybczynski, Robertson Davies, and Mordecai Richler.

Long before the days of computer cataloging, indeed years before the first clunky personal computers, I flipped thousands of three by five index cards secured by metal rails in wooden drawers at the Saint John Public Library. There was a small branch near my house, in the Fairview Plaza, and a larger main branch downtown across from the YMCA. I recall stumbling through the narrow stacks, head angled sideways, perpetually light-headed but happy. I would run my fingers down the spines of the books; titles would just jump out at me from the shelves. It was such an intimate world, in the stacks, opening a book, the voices echoing through me. I still enjoy the browsing method of discovery, and somehow prefer it to the lightning quick digital methods now available. There was something about being physically present in the library, the tactile

experience, reading and touching, wondering and discovering. I read a lot of articles from *Rolling Stone Magazine*, and began reading *The New Yorker*. I liked Calvin Trillin, John McPhee, Michael J. Arlen. I took special joy in the voices of male writers. It was their voices which drew me to writing in the first place, and assisted in my personal and emotional development. I thought, "This is going to get me through the world. This is what I will *do*."

Writing allowed me to find my voices, an identity to latch onto. I began to write myself; write *myself*. See myself in my writing. Create myself in my writing. I conjured up the image of a writer. I took moody photographs of myself writing: portrait of the artist as a young Maritimer. I had a lot of hair then. Now, many years later, my hair has thinned before it had an opportunity to turn white like my father's. I am writing a thesis now. It is about voices in writing. It addresses second language learning in some manner, as this is my specialty. As for my own second language, I speak Japanese, a side effect of long term residency and short term marriage. But I have released my ex-wife, or perhaps she has released me, and I have only photographs and memories and the voices of that language somewhere inside me fading like the signal of a distant radio station. So many nights as a child I would lay awake with my radio, picking up stations far down the Eastern seaboard--Boston, New York, and, if the atmosphere was cooperative, even signals from Florida. It was exciting to lock in on them, to draw those voices into my room and my tiny receiver. Eventually, though, the voices would fade, and all that would remain was static. I once told a friend, who later developed schizophrenia, that writing was not God talking to the universe, a cruel strong voice in some dominant/submissive interplay, but merely one person talking to another. Years later, when I became a radio announcer, one of

my mentors told me, "You're just *talking* to one person." But where was that person? Perhaps in a bedroom somewhere far away listening to my voice fade away to static.

We are in the closing moments of the 20th century, our society intoxicated by images of youth, beauty, slenderness, cleanliness, freshness, perfection, strident athleticism, individualism, feelings and expression, communication. Through it all, we are still thinking and more importantly, addressing issues of voice. We hear voices on the radio, television, and the internet, at home, at work, in our classrooms and in the halls. I walk through a drug store and see an elderly woman sitting at a device that will take her blood pressure. In a female voice, the machine is saying, "I'm going to squeeze your arm now." BC Tel informs me that I may have Martha, the woman who speaks in my voice mail, removed if I wish. But why would I want to? I like her. I want to meet her. We talk about the "voice of so and so." We urge women and men to find their own voices, to speak from the heart, to speak up, speak out. The importance of voices was hammered home to me once more when a Korean man (whom I was tutoring) remarked that in Canada, without an adequate mastery of English, he felt as if he had no voice, no mouth. The image was arresting. He was rendered mute, speech/less; yet his own gregariousness lead him to spew forth frequently comical English utterances in a raspy, heavily-accented, decidedly unfluent voice--like a standard shift car suddenly deprived of fuel, jolting and bucking. Frank comes out with the most eloquent turns of phrases. "I cannot wait to see your beautiful face again," or "It is my good pleasure to give such and such to you." I love his earnestness, his

energy, his ability to speak beyond the boundaries that fluent speakers closely guard.

When native speakers complain about immigrants not being able or seemingly not willing to use English, they speak from a proprietary place, of the ownership of English. Someone speaking the mother tongue, on the other hand, is given leeway, allowed to take liberties, while a second language speaker may be frowned upon for not speaking (or speaking poorly) what is really a nonexistent dialect: proper English. We own English, the thinking goes, and anyone who comes here ought to follow the rules. The issue of the ownership of English has attracted much attention. Pennycook (1995) maintains that the ownership of English reflects certain long-standing practices and beliefs in the West regarding textual ownership, the use of memory, and writing, all of which in my opinion are connected to the issue of voice. In my own experience teaching academic writing at a local college, students without their own academic voice included large verbatim passages from research sources, not, as Pennycook (1995) explains, to be dishonest, but because they themselves could not better express the ideas. In searching for their own voices, writers frequently borrow the voices of others.

When I was learning to write in my teenage years, I would intensely read and re-read my favorite writers searching for what it was that made them good. I remember reading Calvin Trillin, and noting the turns of phrase, the way he handed details, and the sentence structure in his *New Yorker* pieces about wrongful death in small town America. His dry humor and writing acumen spoke to me. Trillin spoke to me. I wanted to speak to him. Once, I wrote to Trillin at the magazine, asking if he knew where I could get a copy of his out-of-

print book *U.S. Journal*. He wrote me back on tiny *New Yorker* stationery, sounding just like he did in his books:

April 27, 1985

Dear Mr. Quinn:

I'm sorry for the delay in answering your letter about U.S. Journal, and I'm sorry to say that I don't know where you can get a copy. The best source for an out-of-print book like that is often the author's basement, but I don't have any extra copies of that one. I haven't heard of anyone who does.

Sincerely,

Calvin Trillin

His letter to me, and his voice, I continue to treasure. Later, at university, I was introduced to John McPhee, a talented *New Yorker* writer known for his interest in sport, Scotland, conservation, and geology. McPhee's articles were usually collected and issued as books, one of which, *Pieces of the Frame* (1979), remains a favorite. McPhee had a way of voicing details: "Ed Talbert also went up from Long Island--from East Patchogue, a hundred and forty miles from Carmel. He drove a truck that carried an old farm tractor, and he took with him two chain saws and three sons" (p. 195). McPhee's prose was concise, detailed, and elegant, the voice easily received.

Some voices, once heard, cannot be forgotten. I remember how alarmed I became when my ex-wife began speaking English, that sweet voice speaking and sounding as a child, a new person gradually emerging. The woman I had married I had known by her Japanese identity, her Japanese voice. But suddenly an alien was gestating inside her, a force emerging. For many reasons, our marriage didn't make it past the second year. Since then a few have asked, "What happened? Why didn't it work out?" I too have wondered. Was it the second,

separate identity that I could not abide? Her new voice? Yes, that was unsettling, but there were other issues. It is over now, except in dreams. In one, she had come to a family reunion, and remained mute, polite, but distantly cold throughout the festivities. Suddenly, she began speaking in fluent English, railing me for whatever she had felt was unfair. In another dream, she appeared as a guest on a Japanese television program¹. She spoke about the mysteries of the West, interpreting Western gestures, culture and feelings for a wide-eyed Japanese audience, her voice crystal clear in both languages.

And the Water Is Calling

How many voices do I remember? I don't know. They keep coming back to me, surprising me with their volume and intensity. Several months ago I answered the phone to a female voice asking for me. Immediately I recognized the voice, one that I had last heard in 1989; it was my old girlfriend Sandra calling from Halifax. Seems she married the guy she met after me, had a son, and was now trying to unmarry. I never forget a voice.

I remember the voice of my school chum, Kevin, a soft spoken boy I knew in high school. He was in the army cadets, and talked about joining the armed forces. He never got the chance. One morning he woke early, loaded his father's shotgun, and took his own life. Maybe there was a note. Maybe not. I still hear his voice. How troubling it is when someone decides to forever silence their own unique voices, and that this act is often preceded by the ritualistic writing of a *note*. The tone is often angry, apologetic, confessional, somber, sometimes sarcastic, always disturbing. Yet the note can never really explain everything, or

¹No doubt the long running Japanese prime time TV show *Naruhodo The World*.

remove the pain of the dead or the living. The note just asks more questions, or concedes there are no answers. "Did they leave a note?" we often ask, as if not leaving one would be rude, or as if a correctly written one might ease the pain and sadness.

When thoughts of ending of my own life drifted through my head a year or so ago, I never considered what I would write, or what I would say. This writer would leave no note, no written trace of himself to be analyzed or debated. We speak of a writer's voice, of what was said, as if the writer were speaking to us from within, or perhaps beyond, the text. I surmised that the act would speak loudly enough; thankfully, due to persistent procrastination and the help of doctors, family and friends, and the Almighty, I never got around to it.

Kevin came back to me once, in a dream. I was high above the St. John River, on the famed Reversing Falls bridge, arms resting on the guardrail. Next to me Kevin was also looking down. But when I stepped back he turned towards me; he had no facial features. Just a smooth surface. Maybe having no face meant that he had lost his voice. I had to accept that I would never hear it for real again. I wrote this dream as a narrative poem, and it was collected in a volume of student writing:

*I hardly knew that boy who jumped into the cold rushing water,
that December morn.
He was just another face in an overcrowded English class.
But there was something about him,
that made me wish I had known him better.
Perhaps it was that slight
but always friendly smile;
or the time he gave me the answers on an important assignment.
When he handed them to me--
when my hand touched the paper he was holding--
a strange dream unfolded in my mind.
It was of a boy,*

leaning on the guard rail of a bridge;
 high above the surface of the water,
 light reflected into his face.
 But when he turned towards me,
 I saw he had no face
 instead a smooth white surface.
 That was when he pulled his hand away,
 and with intense horror and dead fear in his eyes,
 he ran down the hall.
 And it was then I knew that the water was calling him.
 And I was there when they pulled his decayed corpse out of the river
 several weeks later,
 and when they buried him in the ground.
 And from then on,
 I would spend every spare moment leaning on that same guard rail
 looking deep into the thick churning water,
 so cold,
 far below me.
 I could feel it touch me;
 it was lonely
 and it was calling.
 And when I visited the cemetery the other day after school
 I saw the flowers huddled up to the tombstone for warmth,
 and the stone that was highly polished,
 with name and dates below.
 And when I touched the stone,
 that same dream appeared,
 only the smooth surface of the face had features now,
 and they were mine.
 And I knew the water was calling me.
 It was lonely;
 and I must go now to meet it...

Ms. Patricia Murray, my Grade 11 English teacher, the school counselor,
 my mentor, my first crush, later told me that several teachers in the district had
 expressed concern that *And the Water is Calling* was some kind of ode to suicide, a
 warning or a cry for help. Maybe it sounded like it. Maybe it was. But after 20
 years, I'm still around, still writing, still searching and listening for voices.

The Thing Called Voice

Even a brief glance at the literature--both mass market and that issued by the academy--reveals that "voice" in writing (however it may be defined) continues to evade easy investigation. This thing called voice has variously been described in the literature as register, sound, texture, tenor, tone, real voice--all characteristics that we assign to the quality of the human instrument as well. In fact, the metaphor of voice in writing, as a reflection or echo of actual speech, is what makes this metaphor so powerful and enduring in composition studies. Voice has also been associated with the style, attitude, and page "presence" of a writer. We speak of writers who have a unique voice, a reference to some form of signature sound distinctly their own. Problems with the writing process result in loss of voice, which may be due to a minor case of writer's block, or may be a reflection of some psychological or emotional malady, in some extreme cases having dire consequences. Following a serious bout of depression, Hemingway spoke of the words not coming anymore. Another writer, the American poet Randall Jarrell, is suspected of having committed suicide by purposely stepping in front of a car. William Styron, who experienced a major depressive episode, reflected that during his darkest times his voice disappeared: "...the act of writing itself, becoming more and more difficult and exhausting, stalled, then finally ceased" (p. 46). The literary landscape is strewn with writers who, having lost their voices, ended their lives.

All of this is not surprising for those who have an interest in creativity and madness. Jamison (1995) examined what information is available regarding this phenomenon, and found evidence that the two often (but not always) go together. Not that this suggests that mental illness always enhances creativity or

productivity; manic-depressive (bipolar) artists in their high phase have produced impressively, only later to be rendered silent and unproductive during a low phase. Having experienced unipolar depression, I can agree with this observation. I am the least able to function during my down phases, my thinking muddled and negative. The clarity of mind necessary for writing vanishes, and my voice fades to nothing. I just endure until medication, therapy, and my body work in unison to return me to normality. My voice comes and goes, but it is the time when I am hollow and empty of words that is most bleak.

Voices Outside the Academy

In the mainstream popular press, many writers, journalists and writing teachers have written their own books on the writing process, and almost all invariably deal with the notion of voice. In general, these specialists urge the budding writer to develop or "find" their own voice, as if it were an entity unto itself, patiently waiting to be discovered. In some cases, no doubt it is. What is significant is the call to find one's own singular voice; rarely is the notion of multiple voices discussed.

Elbow (1998), a well-known researcher on the art and craft of writing, dedicates two whole chapters on issues of voice and the power that dwells within. "Voice...is what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing--namely, a sound or texture--the sound of 'them' " (p. 288). Elbow groups writing into three categories: writing without voice, writing with voice, and writing with real voice. Writing that has no voice is "dead, mechanical, faceless. It lacks any sound" (p. 287). Technical writing, textbooks, and bureaucratic correspondence fall into this category. Writing with voice "has that fluency, rhythm, and

liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people" (p. 299), but it lacks the power to grab your attention that is evident in real voice writing. Elbow has trouble establishing differences between mere voice and real voice, but acknowledges that the "hearing resonance" (p. 299) that individual readers have may play a role.

Ross (1981), writing in the introduction to her book *Reporting*, says, "Every reporter must work in his own way, speak with his own voice, find his individual style" (p. 1). Again, the notion that one writing voice exists for each writer seems clear. American novelist Richard Rhodes (1995) has challenged this notion in suggesting that "Every work of writing, no matter how modest, no matter how seemingly 'objective', no matter how 'true', is composed in one or more fictional voices" (p. 36). I'm partial to Rhodes' approach, which suggests that an explicit awareness of voices is necessary to write effectively:

Voice is important at the technical level to sustain continuity in work that's protracted or delayed. Voice is a role you put on, as an actor puts on a role when he steps out onto the stage. Once you've found a way to tell a particular story and have exercised that voice long enough to know how to sustain its tone, you can usually activate it again...That's one reason why you should become conscious of voice in writing and make deliberate decisions about it rather than organize it intuitively.

(p. 193)

Rhodes is right. Allowing students to develop their multiple voices will allow them more freedom in the writing process. With practice, students will eventually be able to employ different voices for different writing tasks.

Zinsser (1985) sees writing development as concerning two areas: craft and attitude. Craft is the "mechanical act" (p. 27), the skill of assembling phrases,

sentences, the text itself. This means learning about subject-verb agreement, count and noncount nouns, phrasial verbs, and other standards for written discourse. For students, it follows that the basic skills needed to enter the world of discourse must be learned as they are acquiring knowledge of their multiple voices. Zinsser sees attitude as the "creative act--the expression of who you are" (p. 27). Who you are, he maintains, "won't solidify for several years as *your* style, *your* voice" (p. 27). Once more, voice reflects one voice, who you are. However, in the writing world of the academy and beyond, students must acquire fluency in many voices.

Goldberg's (1986) *Writing Down the Bones* is a wonderful collection of advice, stories, suggestions, remarks, and observations about the writing process. Although she gives no specific instruction on finding voice, her own writing overflows with a powerful, personal sound. She writes: "When I teach a class, I want the students to be 'writing down the bones,' the essential, awake speech of their minds" (p. 4). She refers to the *speech* of mind, to "beginner's mind, the first way I thought and felt about writing" (p. 5). Later, she adds: "We must continue to open and trust in our own voice and person" (p. 12). I think some teachers would see Goldberg's approach to writing as too touchy-feely, too creative, and perhaps a little too loose for the classroom. But this approach is one good way to access personal voice, or at least to become aware of your own sound. This is in contrast to much academic and scientific writing, where the methods, descriptions, observations, and facts are paramount, not the person observing. Payne (1969) in the *Lively Art of Writing* has this to say about the hearing of prose:

When you put a book down because you find it dull or difficult, because you "simply can't read it" or "can't keep you mind on it", it is not your eyes

that object to the printed word. It's your ear, objecting to the *sound* of the printed words--that inner ear which demands from all written words the sound of a human voice.

(p. 105)

Once more, the emphasis here is on the sound of a singular voice speaking out from the depths of discourse to an audience of one. It is our ears, when unable to hear the voices within the discourse, which alert us to voiceless, shallow writing.

I cannot help but think of Derrida here, and his discussion of logocentrism, of the primacy of speech before text. When a book/ text/ discourse is unreadable, perhaps the speech of the writer was not carefully constructed in the text, was not present in the sense that Derrida uses. Thus if speech was not present when the text was born, if the writer was not fully present in the text as text, there can be no absence that sustains the writing, and no ghostly voice. The voice is a zombie voice. The profound frustration of a voiceless text is like the static of the voiceless radio. The text is a zombie, not alive but not dead either. Director George A. Romero's famous horror movies are almost comic in their grisly portrayal of those who walk in the place between death and life. When we read a voiceless text, are we not also reluctant zombies, hopelessly seeking the satisfaction of speech?

Another text to influence contemporary thought on writing is a small volume by Strunk and White (1979). Strunk was a well known American newspaper reporter, White a *New Yorker* writer and author of numerous easy-going essays on American life. *The Elements of Style* was a text I purchased early on in my writing life, drawn to its brevity and sleekness. I was attracted to its

rule-based themes of simplicity, clarity, grammatical correctness, all in a voice that spoke to me in a direct, helpful, useful, parental way. The voice was often in the third person, and before the days of sensitivity to gender, so "he" was frequently used to refer to the writer. Take Rule 11:

11. A participial phrase at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the grammatical subject.

Walking slowly down the road, he saw a woman accompanied by two children.

The word *walking* refers to the subject of the sentence, not to the woman. If the writer wishes to make it refer to the woman, he must recast the sentence.

He saw a woman, accompanied by two children, walking slowly down the road.

(p. 18)

If I were ever to write a sentence about a man observing a woman and two children, I had a model. Sadly, Strunk and White's advice on voice takes up only a page and a half. Here, rule 14, is excerpted:

14. Use the active voice.

The active voice is usually more direct and vigorous than the passive.

I shall always remember my first visit to Boston.

This is much better than

My first trip to Boston will always be remembered by me.

The latter sentence is less direct, less bold, and less concise. If the writer tries to make it more concise by omitting "by me",

My first visit to Boston will always be remembered,

it becomes indefinite: is it the writer or some other person undisclosed or the world at large that will always remember this visit?

This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary.

The dramatists of the Restoration are little esteemed today.

Modern readers have little esteem for the dramatists of the Restoration.

The first would be the preferred form in a paragraph on the dramatists of the Restoration, the second in a paragraph on the tastes of modern readers. The need of making a particular word the subject of the sentence will often, as in these examples, determine which voice is to be used.

(p. 18)

Re-reading this after so many years, I am struck by how simple the mastery of voice appears to be. The active voice is "direct and vigorous" (p. 18). However, Strunk and White caution that constant use of the active voice makes for "forcible writing" (p. 18), but that "brevity is a by-product of vigor" (p. 19). The use of the active voice leads to powerful, pithy writing. In literature, of course, sometimes the opposite is effective. Dickens' sentences often went on forever, the very opposite of brevity. Consider this sentence, from *Pickwick Papers*:

Great men are seldom over scrupulous in the arrangement of their attire; the operation of shaving, dressing, and coffee-imbibing was soon performed; and in another hour, Mr. Pickwick, with his portmanteau in his hand, his telescope in his great-coat pocket, and his note-book in his waistcoat, ready for the reception of any discoveries worthy of being noted down, had arrived at the coach stand in St Martin's-le-Grand.

(p. 73)

At the other extreme, Hemingway's lean, athletic prose was often written in a voice that spoke passively but powerfully, disarming the reader:

In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dusk rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

(p. 3)

A writing instructor could easily attack this passage for sentences that run on and on in a sleepy sort of softness that belies the act of war. But transposing Hemingway into the active voice would ruin him. Active is not necessarily better or clearer; brevity in prose does not necessarily mean that lumbering sentences cannot be powerful. The danger of writing rules, then, is that they often reduce and confine rather than expand and enhance. When we read a student's writing that does not fit the mold, shall we break the text or break the mold? I believe we need to see the mold as still flexible, one that not only helps define the writing but also responds to and is shaped by the writer.

In a decidedly more cryptic way, a 500 page writing handbook by Hodges and Whitten (1986) devotes half a page to the issue of voice:

Gain emphasis by using the active voice instead of the passive voice.

UNEMPHATIC Little attention is being paid to cheap, nutritious foods by the average shopper.

EMPHATIC The average shopper is paying little attention to cheap, nutritious foods.

Exception: If the receiver of the action is more important than the doer, the passive voice is more effective.

There in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books. --John Hersey

Freedom can be squashed by the tyrant or suffocated by the bureaucrat.
--William F Rickenbacker

(p. 330)

It is all so reassuringly simple. Use the active voice for this, the passive for that, and mind the exception. What could be easier? Writing is reduced to rules and guidelines, practical and teachable, guiding teacher and student into a realm of miserable safeness. In the popular press on writing, knowing your own voices is considered an important skill in learning how to write and communicate effectively. However, voice is frequently portrayed in false dichotomies of passive/active, own/other, real/fake, or reduced to easily applied rules that reduce and contain the complexity of the writing act.

Voices in the Academy

The specter of voice in writing has also haunted educational literature and research. Graves (1983), champion of the writing workshop approach, was one of the most influential purveyors of classroom writing and discussion. However, Graves and other workshop proponents have endured criticism from other academics, who suggest that the highly individualized nature of the workshop approach encourages one-on-one student/teacher collaboration, but that a

broadener readership, such as other classmates or those readers outside of the classroom, is not addressed.

Smith (1982) claims that the voice that emerges "between the author and audience is always a specific task, the task of writing an appropriate text in an appropriate register" (p. 81). The effective use of voice in this view is a matter of adjusting and coaxing the voice--much the same way a singer might warm up for a performance by finding a suitable pitch or key--until the appropriate register is reached. However, the writer warming up a voice may not find that it can be so easily tuned in, like a radio station. There can be several stations broadcasting on the same bandwidth, so that one voice does not clearly stand out. Leggo (1998) remembers writing in school:

I was sure everybody else wrote as if transcribing dictation from speakers inside their heads or hearts or souls or stomachs. I heard voices, too, but they were always too quiet or too loud or too contradictory, voices that drowned one another out, voices that I could never master, confusing voices that silenced my voice.

(p. 25)

Consequently, Leggo has questioned the very notion of a singular, unique voice, one that we "find" and then nurture like a stray animal.

I am now convinced that I do not have a personal voice that is mine like a unique inimitable fingerprint. Instead, any personal voice in writing is rhetorically inscribed and, at most, suggests a hint of the writer or one pose like a photograph. While the concept of voice suggests self-presence, it more accurately represents a stance, an entrance, a position of self-presence.

(p. 65)

Our voiceprints, unlike our fingerprints which remain largely the same, grow, age, and change, like wine in a cask. Our writing voices grow and die just as our bodies grow and die. As an announcer, I was always very aware of the different qualities my voice would reflect throughout a single day. In the morning, my voice was clear and precise, young and immature sounding, unauthoritative, with some traces of roughness on the edges. As the day unfolded, my voice broadened and deepened, adopting a broadcast quality. By 5 o'clock I sounded like the guy who says "Thank you for calling BC Tel." My voice is something given to me, not my own exactly, but an organ that reflects and charts the lived experience of being human. The voice hides nothing.

The research in first and second language writing has dealt with two closely related issues: audience and voice. The notion of voice in academic writing, for example, has increasingly become a contentious issue in the literature on the teaching of writing. Zamel (1993) and others have questioned whether academic writing, reflecting the ominous *voice* of the academy, tends to "oversimplify our understanding of academic work and reduce it to a fixed idea that does not reflect reality" (p. 30). Academic discourse does not reflect or harness ESL students' sense of self, and presumably, voice. Scollon (1991) (quoted in Atkinson and Ramanathan 1995) maintains that the emphasis on the self-expressive "voice" of L1 composition studies "confounds Asian students because the individualism implicit in this concept does violence to these students' views of self" (p. 539).

In the past, research has been framed by concern of how L2 writers consider their audience while writing. Some researchers, however, have

questioned the usefulness of the notion of audience in writing. Vipond (1993), for example, argues that the concept of audience suggests a *writing as performance* metaphor. In its place, he argues that this metaphor "could be usefully replaced (or supplemented) by a view of writing as a form of dialogue or conversation" (p.18). Another researcher, Paré (1991), sees the notion of audience as limiting as well, noting that as with acting on a stage, "the audience only responds, never initiates, and the relationship begins with curtain up and ends with curtain down" (p. 47). The idea of audience, then, can turn readers into passive receivers of the written performance.

Voice and Identity

Issues of social and personal identity have come into prominence in second language research as attention has been focused on how identity issues affect and influence second language learning. This research has revealed other factors that may need to be considered for a broader understanding of voice in writing. In one orientation, researchers and teachers have investigated the role social identity plays in second language acquisition. Pierce (1995) is one of the most cited in this regard; she has challenged the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) notion of the "artificial distinctions between the language learner and the language learning context" (p. 10), suggesting that social identity and interpersonal relationships of language learners significantly impact (and shape) language acquisition, rather than simply being side issues of little theoretical or pedagogical importance. A student's personal identity as "an ESL student" or "a non-native speaker" affects their relationships with others, and could also have an effect on composition processes.

The quest for a better understanding of the second language learner's identity, therefore, leads us back to issues of voice in writing. One's identity is adaptable, malleable, undergoing constant change over time. The same may be said of one's voices in writing: They too are highly adaptable, malleable, undergoing constant change. When a second language writer writes, whose voice do we hear? Are we hearing the shaky and uncertain voice of their second language filtered through the depths of their first? Or some disembodied ghost voice? Research I conducted (Quinn, 1998) involving a bilingual Dutch exchange student composing texts in English and Dutch found that the English voice of this second language writer had its own unique characteristics, quite different from writing done in her native language.

The Value of Voice

Several academics have proposed that the search for voice in writing reflects a Western philosophical tradition rooted in an obsession with dichotomies or polarities. Juxtaposed as a relationship of speech/writing, the former is viewed as superior and is associated with positive appraisals such as truth, reality, or honesty. Gilbert (1991) notes that this relationship puts written communication in a weaker, secondary position to speech: "Because speaker and listener are both present when language is spoken, speech becomes privileged as the form of language closest to human presence, closest to the meaning a human presence intended, closest to human truth" (p. 197). Gilbert goes on to point out that texts with voice "are more valued in contemporary Western culture than are texts that seem dis-embodied and detached" (p. 197).

Texts with voice feel more authentic, truthful, perhaps in part because the voice we hear reminds us of speech, which presumably we are more likely to find trustworthy and honest. At the same time, there is a long rhetorical tradition dating back to antiquity (especially in the works of Aristotle and Cicero) which well understood the persuasive power of speech to influence or sway opinion or thought, regardless of what was actually considered truthful. Applying this healthy suspicion to writing, we must also be careful not to believe that voiceful texts are necessarily truthful ones. While it is true that each text must be taken on its own, it is also true that the texts do not exist in isolation and, like learners acquiring a second language, are mixed in context and time.

Voiceless Writing

Graves (1983) talks about "voiceless writing" (p. 228). He suggests that readers will be unable to read this writing. I say he's not completely right. Sometimes readers will put one there whether the text has it or not. Grammar may go and syntax may slip, but voice survives. Consider the back of my Mastercard statement:

There is no interest charged on advances through merchants when we receive payment in full at our payment centre by the due date as shown on the front of this statement. If payment in full is not received by that date, interest is charged on each transaction from the date it was posted until payment in full is posted to your Mastercard Account.

It's hard to put a voice to this, but I imagine Daffy Duck, sputtering at full throttle, or even better, Elmer Fudd, playing an excessively pompous bank official. Whether it was a rabbit with a New York accent, a duck with a lisp, or a stuttering pig, Mel Blanc, the Warner Brothers performer responsible for all of

those classic voice characterizations, could deliver it a hundred different ways. Those characters pop up in commercials now and again, but it is not the same voice.

I have a hamster named Hammy. I thought it was a unique name until someone sarcastically remarked, "That's original!" Seems there was a children's TV show with a hamster named Hammy. Oh well. I still like the name. In fact, I like the breathy "h" sound so much, I plan to name his successors Hamlet, Huston, Hollywood, and so on. For the longest time I thought hamsters had no voice, for his first months with me were relatively soundless, save for odd noises (scratching, biting on the cage, and so on). Then one day, while writing, I heard a cooing sound coming from his house. He had a voice!!! Another day, I found him patrolling the perimeter of his house, chirping happily. But most of the time he lives his hamster life thoughtfully and silently, resorting to utterances only when the spirit moves him.

In university, I had really good instructors. I want to name them because so often the good people go unnamed, unvoiced as it were. To say that they toil in silence, largely unrecognized, would be an exaggeration. Some are well-published members of the academy, others teachers from high school. So here they are: Peter King, Patricia Murray, Mrs. Watson, and Professors Russ Hunt, Doug Vipond, Jim Reither, Alan Mason, and Tom Parkhill (all of St. Thomas University, in Fredericton, New Brunswick). A few were not specifically writing teachers, but they approached writing as if it were important and really mattered. It was not just a way to get a good mark (but I did get a few, despite myself), but a special way to speak, express, discover, argue, confess, cajole, and confide. Writing was a way of learning about a subject, a process of inquiry.

I remember one particular St. Thomas class fondly. The instructor, James Reither, had us writing every week. It was one of those experiences that has stayed with me over time. I still remember the students in that class, although the names are gone. I kept some of the writing from that class, and, now years later, find it surprisingly readable and full of voice:

Perched on the rock, tracing wispy blue smoke drifting from the cabin through the leaves of fall, I try to write. But things are not going well, for reasons that seem to have something to do with this being Thanksgiving weekend. The wind is cold. I am supposed to be thankful, but there is nothing to be thankful for.

Coming into the country had been the game plan: Get away from it all to nature and seek a cure for artistic ennui. Surround myself with a rustic cabin, a brick fireplace, a nearby creek, a '46 Massey Ferguson tractor, a full fledged garden, the eclectic colors of fall all about, and things should happen. Words should gush.

Not this time. The cabin is made of pressed chipboard from an anonymous factory, its fireplace blackened and falling down. The creek is wizened to brush and scattered with the residue of intruders--soda cans, milk jugs, pizza boxes. The tractor hasn't run in years. And the garden is shamelessly overgrown with the most terrible weeds one could imagine. Weeds choke the vegetables, strangle the potatoes, dwarf the onions, inhibit the cucumbers, annoy the carrots, kill the tomatoes--bad publicity for this fertile land.

What teachers of writing classes must remember is that change and improvement in students' writing does not occur instantly. The movement is necessarily slow, as voices grow and develop, as each student expresses new voices in writing that can called their own.

Voice, Speech, and Writing

In order to gain insight into voice and writing, we need to delve deeper, into the heart of our literary and philosophical history. Pope (1976) details that the earliest Greek literature was completely in verse, composed to be read aloud. In the hellenistic classroom, the task of the teacher was to demonstrate how a text was to be read. Literary appreciation and criticism came last. From the earliest times the sound of a text, the discourse voiced, was deemed most important. In the 1720s while writing *Gulliver's Travels*, Jonathan Swift was said to have read portions of the day's writing to his servants in order to hear the text aloud. In the 1800s Dickens toured America reading his work, and to this day the spectacle of an author reading his or her work attracts many desiring to hear a text voiced by its creator.

However, many scholars continue to find the notion of writing and voice a troublesome mix. In his comments on speech and writing, Jacques Derrida uncovers something wild and not easily digested or even understood in the conventional sense. Johnson (1997) paraphrases Derrida, noting that "speech is the guarantor of presence and of authenticity whereas writing represents artifice and absence (p. 4-5). Derrida's philosophical writing does not, by his own admission, reflect an attempt at a systematic approach; rather, his writings present unfinished strokes of a larger, infinitely complex work-in-never-ending-progress, the shape and nature of which remains uncertain.

Derrida turns traditional beliefs on their head, contesting a tradition in Western philosophy where writing has been considered subordinate to speech. At the same time, Derrida maintains that since the Greeks, serious thinking has

depended on writing, despite speech holding a privileged status. Many scholars have written that philosophical thought, as well as a host of other human endeavors, would not have been able to progress and develop were it not for the record keeping function that writing allows.

Derrida shows that writing is different from speech in three distinct ways:

1. Writing can speak without the other.
2. Written signs can break with their contexts.
3. Spacing makes writing vulnerable.

Speech is dependent on the speaker, and once spoken, is lost. Writing can be carried through, and is transcendent through time, not dependent on the writer and existing separately from the context of creation, always out of context. Spacing opens writing that can be merged, affixed, and attached to other texts. When viewed from the perspective of voice, we see philosophy's uneasy relationship with writing in a new light. Speech is honored over writing, yet writing is able to carry voice through time. Writing, in this sense, is the preserver and guardian of speech, carrying voice onward, albeit in a way that while relaying something of the essence of the writer, is also affected and changed by new contexts in which the writing is taken.

The Flickering of Meaning

Of all the volumes of literary criticism and interpretation I have had the opportunity to read, Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) discussing phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, as well as psychoanalytic and Marxist theories of literature, has been the most memorable. Although beginning a discussion of these important issues would

be, as they say, beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, it may be useful to touch lightly on several areas that seem to point to new understanding. Eagleton deals with the notion that language is not simply a neutral carrier of meaning that some claim it to be:

Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace...When I read a sentence, the meaning of it is always somehow suspended, something deferred or still to come: one signifier relays me to another, and that to another, earlier meanings are modified by later ones, and although the sentence may come to an end the process of language itself does not.
(p. 128)

In our technologically advanced world, we tend to think of language in digital metaphors and images of carrier waves, signal strength, interference, the supposed purity of communication. Eagleton speaks of "the web-like complexity of signs...the back and forth, present and absent, forward and sideways movement of language in its actual processes" (p. 132). I recently moved into a new apartment, and had brought my previous phone number with me. Almost since the first day I moved in, a near constant ringing tone plagued my line. Over the course of six weeks, I complained ten times. BC Tel sent a parade of technicians to replace wires, change the drop, change the line card. Finally, I was given a new telephone number. Nothing worked. BC Tel could not find the problem.² We believe in technology as the answer to improving our life, but there are problems even the technologists cannot solve.

²BCTel kept looking and eventually found a peculiar voltage fluctuation in a cable not far from my home.

I believe, as Eagleton suggests, that thinking of language-as-reading or language-as-writing as a stable carrier or transmitter underestimates the complexity of these literary acts. Reading is not the scanning of information into the hard drive of the mind. This reflects my own exasperation in the second language classroom when students request a definition or elaboration of a word, phrase, textual or spoken discourse. Where do I begin and where do I end? Language is endlessly making and remaking itself. The elusiveness and complexity of language, this constant flickering of signifier and signified, this unending chain of signification, does not lend itself to easy pedagogical explanations. This is the paradox of language: it is definable/not definable, continuously morphing into yet another signifier and another signified. Nothing is unified, nothing is stable. Within this instability, this space, echoes a multitude of voices.

From Plato onwards, the great Western philosophical faith in the superiority of the spoken has challenged the importance and necessity of writing. The well-known quotation from *The Seventh Letter* (1973), "That is why any serious student of serious realities will shrink from making truth the helpless object of men's ill-will by committing it to writing" (p. 140), makes clear Plato's belief that writing is incapable of recording "serious thoughts" (p. 142). This dismal view of writing has been challenged by Neel (1988) who seeks to reclaim writing from Plato, "to free writing from his tyranny" (p. 6).

Our spoken voices are, in a way, our audible selves, and when we speak we speak ourselves with every nuance, tone, and breath. Aristotle and Cicero knew the seductive power of voice in oration. This is why voice has continued to fight through writing, as an echo of that which is intended to be spoken but

which is written. But by writing, in order to find voice, we unwittingly cast our discourse into the ocean of printed and malleable text, adrift and free of original context, meaning, and intention. "It is for this reason," continues Eagleton, "that the Western philosophical tradition, all the way from Plato to Levi-Strauss, has consistently vilified writing as a mere lifeless, alienated form of expression, and consistently celebrated the living voice" (p. 130). Writing is the enemy, yet few would seriously claim that it has not been useful or valuable. Philosophical debates and theory since Plato have depended on writing, and it is clear social, cultural, and technological developments would have been very different were it not for the power that writing provides. Still, we question writing, and we question voice, the echoes of texts past and present loud in our ears.

Chapter Two The Invisible Man

This text grew out of an experience, a time, and a university course in which I first began to write about the depression that threatened to engulf me. I remember it as a very intense, heady time, each day lived on the edge of a great dark abyss. At the time I was living with an elderly gentleman, and trying to deal with a major depression that, after brewing for several years, had suddenly swept over me. I will ask and try to answer a question: Why is it important in this thesis to excerpt a work about the death of an old guy and the depression of a young guy? How does it relate to voices in writing? I include this text in this thesis because I believe it is important to not only discuss and reflect about matters of voice, but also to *perform* voices. Our multiple writing voices are active, living, breathing, vibrating, and yearn for expression. Merely discussing these voices, quoting researchers or authors, is not enough. Performing voices means giving sound to adventures and mishaps, victories and defeats, and all that dwells in between. Performing voices means taking risks, stretching the limit, pushing the envelope, in whatever way a writer wishes.

I had not written anything personal in many years, and it was in the process of fighting back the depression that I rediscovered some of my own lost voices. It is the performative and healing value of these voices that I wish to uncover in these pages. For me, now, the text harbours several of my voices of writing, one of which is struggling with an insidious disease and how it affects the perception of the world around me. In the beginning, when I was most disturbed and fragile, I think I did an excellent job of sheltering myself from the hostilities of the world. I quit my job at a language school, staying home during

the day to read and rest, only going out in the late afternoons to class. Some would say that isolation is entirely the wrong approach. But what is one to do? I had no family locally, and few friends. That was the way I had to deal with the situation. When the depression first began, I waded in melancholy, at times literally submerged, sometimes unable to speak in class or stay very long, constantly irritating my girlfriend with what she perceived to be my utter selfishness. In Karp (1996), a woman named Nina describes depression as "an insidious vacuum that crawls into your brain and pushes your mind out of the way...Depression steals away whoever you were, prevents you from seeing who you might someday be, and replaces your life with a black hole" (p. 23-24). The depressed individual implodes, collapses inward, becoming a black hole from which even light cannot escape.

Depression is the perfect disease of the 90s: self-indulgent and subjective. As I juggled medication to control my rising and falling moods, acquaintances would say, "Oh, surely you must be feeling better by now." No, I wasn't. Depression does not fit neatly into one's daily schedule of activities and errands, nor does it necessarily run its course in a predictable manner. Indeed, it is the sheer unpredictability of it all that is most maddening. I could barely schedule my day or make plans, for I would never know where my moods and energy might take me. I could not rely on feeling stable.

Now, at least, I have the energy and thoughts to move through the hours and days of life, having for the meantime conquered or at least managed the depression. It is not over, in any final clinical sense, nor do I at this time feel it will ever be over. Better than fifty percent of those with depression will likely have another episode. But that leaves fifty percent who will not. At the very least,

working through this has enabled me to discover new voices, and to be able to write again.

I am depressed. I am not referring to the casual, off-handed way in which people commonly use the word (as a synonym for down, sad, or blue). I mean *really* depressed. Chemically. Biologically. Emotionally. The news stunned me, caught me unprepared, off-guard, unable to respond, staggering in the street. The thing about depression is that it sneaks up on you, the victim often oddly unaware of the gradual decline. Depression robs you of your soul, your self, and your self-esteem. The world loses its joy. You are emptied of that which defines you. It often takes an outsider--a kindly doctor, or an insightful and caring friend--to suggest a course of action needs to be taken. Sadly, too many become accustomed to functioning with some level of depression, and may live with grinding stress or feelings of worthlessness for years. I know I did. Some end up taking their own life before help arrives.

Statistics on depression offer some insights, but like data on other human conditions, the full story is not always completely revealed, nor is the personal human story told. A *Maclean's* magazine (1997) cover story reports that over one million Canadians deal with depression each year. Why so many? Is it due to the restructuring of the family and society as a whole, the rise of technology and the loss of face to face human contact, the shifting and unstable nature of work, or the hectic 24 hour pace of our brave new world? Perhaps it is just that we have more accurate numbers than in the past. Marano (1999) notes that depression in Western countries is the "second most disabling ailment" (p. 30) after heart disease. Increasing numbers of people of all ages--men and women--are

crowding doctor's offices and mental health clinics with complaints of general fatigue or sleep disturbances. Like myself, they are startled to discover that even without an obvious drop in one's mood, depression may be present. As Turkington & Kaplan (1997) have intoned, "To be depressed is to live with a sense of nothingness. People who are depressed say they feel numb, they feel empty, they feel invisible" (p. XVII).

Indeed. This, then, is the journal of an invisible man.

Talked with my brother David last evening, both of us calling each other back several times. I called him on a whim, after listening to Alison Krauss & Union Station again. Mellow bluegrass music--and her beautifully smooth voice--is the only thing that calms me these days. I'd sent him a cassette copy, and wanted to know his reaction.

David is my closest and dearest brother, the one I always turn to when life seems poised to pull me under. We see each other infrequently now, although he had stopped in on his way back from Asia a few years ago. I told him about what the doctor had said. The atmosphere of our home and family, like any social system, had its own unique tensions and stress. There were a few rumors: A guitar supposedly broken over someone's head; a pot thrown in anger at someone else hitting my father and knocking him out cold. Even I remember that. But there was something that was eating away at me, as I tried to think of my life in new terms, trying not to live in the past. I've made it through 35 years, but I can go no further. As I look at my life, I'm beginning to suspect that I've been living with a chronic low grade depression off and on for several years. The

latest bout came in 1994, around the time of my separation from my wife, and has dogged me ever since. It moved on me slowly, like hair thinning, one strand at a time. It's not dark but just a dead end, thinking and thoughts that have no destination, no purpose other than to irritate and discourage. You can't think your way out. There's no pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, no snapping out of it.

Wednesday morning. I actually slept last night, with help from a synthetic melatonin supplement. Melatonin is a hormone produced by the pineal gland and thought to regulate the body's sleep cycles. My physician suggested I secure a synthetic supply across the border in Washington state, as it has not been approved for use in Canada. I remembered an amusing news story in a New Brunswick paper about a hapless group of margarine smugglers caught red handed by customs officials on some back woods logging road. After trying it for a week, I report to the doctor that the melatonin has given me only partial improvement, and it makes me feel very depressed in the morning.

The day the doctor diagnosed depression, he started me on an antidepressant. I was very skeptical, but agreed to go on it and see him in a few weeks. I did so, and after a brief doctor-supervised hiatus from the drug, mostly to quench my doubts about its necessity, I went back on it last Friday, and since then it's been hell. One of the curiosities of modern pharmacology is that the same drug, on the same person, can have dramatically different effects over time. When I first took Effexor it resembled a gentle sleeping potion, providing me with the first lengthy and satisfying sleep in months. This time around, the drug mimics the effects of a Starbucks double espresso. I stumble wide-eyed through the first few days back on the drug, feeling anxious and driven, but empty of

energy and thought. Today I feel normal, at least normal for me, even energetic for the first few hours, but now sleepy and lethargic. It seems my body needs more time to adjust to the medication.

Up twice during the night. Ate frosted flakes at 4 am. Frosted flakes are excellent at this time of the morning. Rain. Temp: 6.7 degrees. I was literally stunned back in December when my doctor said, "I think you're depressed." But I had all the classic symptoms. Sleep disturbance--mostly waking up for two and three hours a night. I'd always had poor self-esteem, as far back as memory takes me. I had never felt totally worthless as a person, just small and relatively uninteresting in the wider world. Yet I presented myself as a gregarious and outgoing person. My weight had shot up, but I'd thought that was due to lack of exercise and daily doses of microwave popcorn. Now I know that for the past two to three years (and at various times throughout my life) I've had mild depression--known as *dysthymic disorder*. Dysthymia has not always been used as a rubric for this condition. Over the years it has been referred to variously as *depressive temperament*, *neurotic depression*, *depressive personality*, *hysteroid dysphoria*, and *characterological depression*. Previously this condition was seen in the context of a character or personality disorder, but in 1980 the American Psychiatric Association reclassified dysthymia as a distinct affective or mood disorder, although there is still debate as to where the following symptoms ought to be placed within the broad spectrum of mental illness. According to the latest (1994) DSM-IV criteria, the guidebook used by many North American psychiatrists to categorize and diagnose mental illness, dysthymia's key characteristics are:

- a. poor appetite or overeating
- b. insomnia or hypersomnia

- c. low energy or persistent fatigue
- d. low self esteem
- e. indecisiveness or poor concentration
- f. feelings of hopelessness

Burton & Akiskal (1990) note that "dysthymic disorder is characterized by chronicity: the persistence of intermittent depressive symptoms associated with dysthymia must have at least two years' duration" (p. 14). The minimum for children and adolescents is half that. When I read this, I found myself mentally checking off several characteristics. The same text further notes that "dysthymic patients often complain of being depressed 'since conception' or of 'feeling miserable all the time'. They also seem to view themselves as belonging to 'an aristocracy of suffering'" (p. 5). This group, according to Brody (1995), is thought to number close to seven million in the United States. Dysthymics live in a world of profound negativism, believing their situation will never improve. They marry less, divorce more, and are often underemployed. If I did have this disorder, I thought, it would explain the dark sluggishness, paralyzing indecisiveness, persistent melancholia, and poor concentration I'd felt in recent years and at times throughout my life. Perhaps this was an explanation for a life long nail-biting habit that had left my fingers red and unsightly, and my lower front tooth chipped and worn.

I've never had much view of the future. That is to say, I could never speak of events or plans for the future as if they might really happen. When I was in my early 20s I used to joke with a good friend, Walter, that I wouldn't live much beyond 30. Was it a remark driven by dysthymia? Looking back, those ten years seemed like a hole in time itself that I could not escape. I was not overtly suicidal,

but could not imagine getting older, being married, being a husband and father, having someone else depend on me. ME!!! I looked in the eyes of couples at shopping malls and on streets, searching for their motivation to have children. What would possess people to take on such crushing responsibility? When I looked into the future I saw nothing at all, a great black blankness; I had no inkling of what I might be able to accomplish, and no particular drive to get there. I abruptly changed careers, searching for fulfillment and satisfaction, but found neither. Papolos & Papolos (1997) note that "there is a paucity of ideas and a loss of the natural capacity to imagine a future. When the mind is laid barren of thought, the imagination cannot make the necessary leap into the future, and the individual experiences himself as out of time and isolated from the ongoing current of life" (p. 11).

Yes, somewhere out of time, at the edges of the river, out of the current, in a small shallow pool circling but going nowhere.

Anhedonia is another symptom--the gradual loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities and hobbies. Mine was photography. For much of the year I would glance at my camera bag, and recall another time when I was passionate. In Japan, I had spent entire days touring the prefecture on my motorcycle, in search of images. I would shoot a roll or three on just one plant or flower, or some rural scene I was trying to get just right. I often read photography books at my desk at school, reading and re-reading books by Freeman Patterson and others.

Yet now I seldom picked up my camera, or looked at my Japan slides. Photo magazines arrived in the mail and I would simply file them away, unread. I stayed home a lot, in my room, comfortable and safe, but isolated and bored. I

had hundreds of cassette tapes and plenty of CDs, but none sounded right. I would skip through an album, not dwelling or even listening. Evenings were spent watching television, not for pleasure but merely to pass the time away, sailing through primetime watching a dozen channels at once. I frequently talked to myself out loud, had shouting matches with unseen foes, or relived confrontations in which I conquered. Irritability was another warning sign, it turns out. For unexplained reasons I felt an urge to bang my head against a solid object (a door or wall), or to punch or otherwise injure myself. A few times I did, other times only mockingly. I am very high functioning, appearing if not happy then at least capable and sane. No one would ever know anything was amiss.

I have been reading many books with cheery titles like *Overcoming Depression*, *Beyond Prozac*, *Listening to Prozac*, and *Making the Prozac Decision*. I'm not taking prozac, but my particular antidepressant (generic name *venlafaxine*, trade name *Effexor*) is often discussed in books that deal with new generation antidepressants (collectively known as SSRIs, for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), that are designed to act on neurotransmitters in the brain with fewer and less disruptive side effects than previous antidepressants. Effexor is described in the *Compendium of Pharmaceutical Sources* (1998) as "a phenethylamine bicyclic derivative, chemically unrelated to tricyclic, tetracyclic or other available antidepressant agents" (p. 516). That is to say, Effexor isn't a true SSRI--it's in a separate class, with a unique four ring chemical architecture--although it does act on serotonin levels (as Prozac does), but also boosts norepinephrine (as older tricyclic antidepressants do) and has some weak action on dopamine.

The modern language of psychotropic drugs reminds me of the modern language of computers, heavy with acronyms and fancy sounding names. Yet I

am not a chemist or a psychiatrist, and the specific chemical profile is quite beyond my understanding, and beside the point. I just know it works. After taking Effexor for several weeks now, I no longer feel that I am "on medication". Only mild tension in my jaw (and occasional inadvertent clenching of teeth), plus the odd cold sweat, serve to remind me. I have, if not more energy, at least a steadier supply. Overall, I seem to be less prone to sleepiness this time around than when I was on it briefly in December. I do feel occasionally sleepy in mid-afternoon, but I think this is due to normal changes in available energy and alertness through the day rather than a side effect of the drug. But who knows?

Depression doesn't have anything to do with intelligence, with how smart or dumb you think you are. This goes against society's deeply held belief that depression is some kind of moral failure or personal weakness. In other words, that depression is the fault of the depressed. And while two out of ten North Americans are thought to be clinically depressed, this dim view of depression as a weakness of personality may be why so few seek treatment, or even realize they are depressed. I was with some old friends tonight, friends who have known me for ten years. Marilyn, who happens to be a clinical psychologist, listened carefully to my story of depression and despair. Then she said, "I've thought that for a long time." I was shocked, for she had seen and felt something about me long before I became aware.

I am now more convinced than ever that this is a real phenomenon. Yet there remains an element of denial in this for me. Accepting my situation is difficult. It can't really be true, can it? It's frightening to believe that I've been gliding through life, chronically, mildly dysthymic. How much of life have I missed because of this? In what way have my life choices and decisions been

influenced? There is no telling the extent, but it would explain a great many unusual events and experiences.

Last summer, for instance, I had occasion to attend a viewing of the annual fireworks competition. It was a warm Saturday evening in Vancouver. I met Sue and Iain, two friends I had known since Japan, and together with Iain's parents we headed down to a nice spot of beach near the yacht club in Kitsilano. But I was strangely irritated and anxious, not talking at all, with no appetite and no wish to see fireworks. I remember thinking to myself, "It's no big deal. I've seen fireworks. There can be no new colors or patterns I've not seen before." So I simply said I was leaving, but gave no explanation. I thanked them for their hospitality, and walked away, west along the beach towards Spanish Banks. People were beginning to gather along the edge of the shore. Further along I happened upon some other friends I knew from UBC, and I stopped to talk, not because I wanted to, but because I had been seen and it would be rude to do otherwise. But I shortly excused myself, and walked up Tolmie to my house. Darkness fell and as I lay in bed I felt the rumble of explosions in the distance. I remember being annoyed that fireworks were so loud.

There was a brief moment Sunday evening when the depression seemed to lift, like a fog bank suddenly rolling onward. I was in the bathroom, washing my face. I looked up and into the mirror. I could see myself so clearly. Everything seemed clear; a feeling of euphoria and peace passed through me. It had been so long. But just as quickly the murkiness returned--like a cloud descending. I can't remember what it feels like not to feel this way. That is the nature of the beast. It prevents self-reflection and impairs insight, like walking through a thick Atlantic

fog, moisture cool on my face. There are no reference points. I can see, but there is nothing to view.

*"In the path of righteousness there is life,
in walking its path there is no death"*

Proverbs 12:28

Perhaps I have not been walking the right path. Maybe one too many evil thoughts, not enough prayers said, or few good deeds done. Whatever the reason, the pills don't seem to be working. I actually don't know what I am supposed to feel like, but I think I can safely assume I shouldn't be thinking of suicide. Nonetheless these thoughts cross my mind. Just the idea of nonbeing. I do not wish to use the word death, for that would imply what I am living now is life. All around me is good. A comfortable place to live. A successful start to a graduate programme. A burgeoning career as a second language teacher. I've got an old Macintosh Powerbook, a nice stereo system, a mountain bike in the shed. Yet all of this means nothing to me. I only imagine nonbeing as another place, an 'other' place. But I am too chicken to go to that place. I'm not a risk taker. I would never jump or slash or hang or shoot or swallow. Would God be waiting for me in the other? Would he forgive my sins? Would it be any better than it is now?

Sunday evening. Rainy and mild. I went out to church this morning with Hilary, my girlfriend. We sat in the pew and watched. The church is the only Anglican church in West Point Grey. It is not a high church, but lately the services have been getting longer and longer, increasingly festooned with odd ceremonies. Today there was, as usual, a "children's minute", a misnomer as it always lasts at least ten. Following this, the rector invited someone to do an interpretive dance, to show the presence of creativity in the Christian church. I

couldn't believe my ears. I thought he was merely joking, or worse, that my depression had finally given way to full blown psychosis. But there it was: a dancer dressed in Medieval style clothing, leaping and swirling up and down the aisle.

I have lived with an elderly man for most of my time here. I arrived in Vancouver after a long flight from Bangkok via Seoul on December 11th, 1995. I so feared the idea of returning to Canada that I took several Valium (available as an over the counter drug in any Thai pharmacy) before I left Thailand, hoping to find the sleep that had eluded me in Bangkok. Nevertheless, I remained wide awake on the way to Seoul, crowded in with grumpy businessmen. I felt I was on a journey into darkness. I took a few more Valium in the lounge at Kimpo Airport in Seoul, but I couldn't sleep, paranoid that I'd miss my flight. Once I boarded the plane, and took my seat in business class, I had a splendid meal on fine china and passed out shortly thereafter. Hours later I awoke. I could feel my stomach lifting as the plane descended, my eyes opening to the sight of a complimentary tie laying on the seat next to me.

"Congratulations", the stewardess informed me, "you slept the most of any passenger on this plane." I never did wear that ugly tie.

My first three weeks in Vancouver were spent at the International Hostel at Jericho Beach. I remember falling asleep in the cab on the way from the airport, the incessant rain, the great puddles that appeared in the grass outside my window. The hostel, an old converted World War II army barracks, was like a warehouse of dreams. There were lots of Aussies blowing through town on the way to Banff or Whistler to ski or maybe find a job for the winter. Several

Japanese hoping to shop and ski. And a half dozen people who had arrived, like me, with no specific plans, other than trying to get a résumé together, taking odd jobs around the hostel for a free night. I cleaned the big industrial kitchen in the basement, the toilets, urinals, and sinks, anything for a buck. On the second Sunday, I attended the closest Anglican church, and asked the minister if he knew anyone who might have a room. He said he'd look into it. That's when I was introduced to Curt. I pegged him for 70. Curt was warm and friendly, in remarkably good spirits and shape for his age. God promises three score years and ten. Curt had just turned 84.

I saw my doctor again last Friday. He's the friendly type, short with red hair and a mustache, who listens carefully and sympathetically, the kind of doctor to which other physicians send themselves and their families. He thinks I may have a double depression, that is, a major depressive episode on top of dysthymia. More cheery news. We talk about symptoms, sleep, watery eyes. I have been reading books, consulting technical data, calling the manufacturer of Effexor for advice. I suggest doubling the medication to achieve a more therapeutic effect. He agrees, disappears for a moment, and returns with an entire box of physician's samples, enough to last a month.

"Don't tell anyone", he says. "See you in two weeks."

Who knows when we will die? Perhaps only God. Curt is not doing well. He has lost 20 pounds in the last month. He doesn't look bad, actually, slim and remarkably like the man he was on his wedding day so many years ago. But he can't lose anymore. There are rumors from nurses at the hospital that he doesn't

have long. The people at church remark how stooped and changed he looks, barely able to walk to his car with a walker. He asked me to drive him to the hospital today to visit his wife, as he can no longer manage to park the car and walk in from the lot. I would sit in the car outside the entrance to the Purdy Pavillion, reading dry academic articles as the rain came down. His wife has been in the hospital four years, and until quite recently, he faithfully drove out to see her twice a day every day. She no longer recognizes him, no longer knows where she is, perhaps not even *who* she is. But Curt was dedicated, diligent, never missing a day, even the day of Vancouver's worst snow storm of the century, by her side, feeding her lunch and dinner, loving her the only way he could. It must be so hard to lose someone this way...the mind slowly drifting away until the body itself gives up.

I have to remind myself that Curt drinks. I am not being cruel here, blaming him for bringing ill health upon himself. Hell, I didn't even know this when I first moved in. It was only after I stopped working and started going to university that I caught on. When he'd had a bit too much, he'd ask me what I was doing tomorrow, and then five minutes later ask the same question. That's when it first hit me. The unmistakable odor made my head rush. I kept track of how many bottles of whiskey he'd go through in a week, sneaking into his secret stash and removing the receipts from those brown liquor store bags. I don't know what I thought I was going to do with all of them. Inform the parish priest? Tell his daughter? I struggled with what to do, and decided that it was none of my business. Who am I to tattle on an old man? It's his life. No harm done, if you exclude driving while impaired. But Curt had been driving the same route to the

hospital for years, and likely could drive it better intoxicated than many sober. I ended up throwing the receipts away, and hoping he didn't have an accident.

I guess watching someone you love slowly die will do that to you. Now the same is happening to Curt, and I have just realized how much it is affecting me. He goes to bed at night and I wonder if he will wake up. Will it be me that will have to call the family, the police? Every morning I listen for coughing, or creaking of the bed. Not too many people I know go to bed wondering if their roommate is going to be alive in the morning.

His daughter told me the inevitable grim news Friday night, quietly ushering me outside into the damp night air. Curt was inside watching the news.

"It's cancer", she said, staring through the dim light on the front steps. "His doctor told me he's full of it. I don't think he has very long."

I could see her eyes turn slightly glassy. I shoved my hands deeper in my pockets. I glanced at the ground. Reg, her brother, stood silent and supportive beside her.

"I'm with him every day", I said, "I'll try to make him as comfortable as possible."

She thanked me, offered even to pay me for my trouble, but I said no. It wasn't about money. It was about looking after a friend. Later I thought this but could tell no one: Curt was like the grandfather I never knew. That night was not a good one for me. I drove over to Hilary's and we cried. I think everyone who hears news like this wants to know one thing: How long? How many months? When will the end come? There are no ready answers. Only God knows.

Curt seems unaware of the seriousness of his condition. Maybe he doesn't know. But who would want to know? Here in the West it is almost a moral duty to inform the patient of the illness, as if knowing what you are dying of makes death more tolerable. In Japan, where I once lived, those with terminal illnesses are kept mostly in the dark, are told it's just something minor, a "cold" or some such survivable bout. Many people die of colds in Japan.

When I first learned about this practice, I thought it cruel and inhumane, a disservice to the patient and a terrible lie for the medical community. Now I'm not so sure. Would I want to know if I was dying? Wouldn't I be happier knowing it was a "cold"? Perhaps I would become suspicious if long lost relatives started showing up at my bedside, wishing me well. Curt knows he has cancer, but may be in denial as to how much, where, and how long he has to live. I've joined him in this denial. As I helped him up the stairs to his bedroom this evening, I could not accept that this warm hand in mine will turn cold and lifeless. Being God must be hard sometimes.

A new day. Curt is sitting comfortably in his new recliner, the throne of the aged, watching Bob Barker and "The Price is Right", reading the morning paper. I helped him downstairs this morning, made him salty porridge and served cold orange juice.

"Oh, this is just great," he said, "I've been looking forward to this since seven o'clock this morning".

At the end of one's life, there must be so few things to look forward to. Even waking up in the morning must be a novelty. My anti-depressant medication has been increased, and I seem to wake up in a more balanced frame of mind. But still no soul. I am able to function, but there is no spark. Instead, I

am restless, pacing back and forth in the upstairs hall, deciding for the third time in an hour to floss my teeth. It takes tremendous concentration just to stay seated and read academic articles. Yet I suspect many graduate students encounter this--the boredom of the academy, the self-induced extended coma of the scholar.

Curt, frail and weak, creeps downstairs with me to his right. His hand feels warm and reassuring in mine, like I imagine a grandfather's hand might.

I never knew my grandfather, my father's father. My brothers remember him though. The only story I can recall is something about him standing at the bathroom sink and saying that my brothers shouldn't eat ice cream because it would freeze their water works. There is an old photograph, too, one of my great grandfather, my grandfather, and another man posing in front of a Model-T Ford. The picture is hazy and other-worldly, like old French daguerreotype photographs from the 1800s. They are not smiling. They look like ghosts to me.

We make our way to Curt's recliner, and I pour him orange juice as usual. I suggest breakfast but he just laughs and says "Noooo, nooo." His clothes are ill-fitting now, his trousers hanging like those on a stick figure. His face is rough and unshaven, but his hair is beautiful, long silver locks slicked back with water. I bathed him several nights ago, shampooed that hair, helping his now oddly-shaped body into the tepid water.

I have never shampooed my father's hair. Dad's hair, as I remember it, is just as lovely, more yellow than white in places, but glorious. He lives in rural New Brunswick, in a small village called Gondola Point. He is an Anglican Archdeacon, an impressive sounding title that I always explain is one less than a bishop. This may not be ecclesiastically accurate, but it seems to placate most people, who smile, feign interest, and utter "Oh really" or "Is that right?". My

father is the kind of minister who makes people feel comfortable with spirituality by not shoving it down their throats, or being pompous or arrogant. At his retirement party, some members of the vestry and congregation wept, so moved were they by his good works over some 30 years at St. Luke's, and so sad to see him go. But Dad never retired. The Bishop kept asking him to do "favors", typically, requesting that he go in and rescue a parish in trouble. Anglican ministers are part of the wider world. Struggles with alcohol and drugs, marital problems, coveting and bedding parishioners' wives, and serious bouts with depression, psychosis, and insanity keep my father's services in demand. I would like him to stop, but I think he still enjoys the ministry, and has a genuine desire to work with those who would be otherwise neglected.

I had to share my father's best years, those important growing years for me, with an entire congregation, and though I feel no bitterness, I often wonder how my life and our relationship would have been different had he not been a minister. But then again, if my father had worked a 9 to 5 job away from home, I would likely have seen less of him and not known what he truly did. My childhood friends didn't seem to know where their fathers worked, or what they did exactly, so in one way I felt fortunate that my father worked out of our home, or out of the church next door to the massive rectory where I grew up. I would meet the people he counselled, enter the funeral homes holding his hand as he spoke softly to a bereaved family, spend hours a day simply *being with* my father. Bly (1992) reminds us that if a son does not know what his father does throughout the day, "a hole will appear in the son's psyche, and the hole will fill with demons who tell him that his father's work is evil and that the father is evil"

(p. 21). At least I knew what my father did during the day, and that it was not evil. But a hole developed nonetheless.

I was immensely proud of him and the respect he commanded, but I'll probably never live up to that, which was one reason I elected not to enter the ministry. I couldn't bear to be compared to him, to have people say, "Oh, yes, Harry's son. Your father was a great man." My parents (especially my mother) encouraged me from time to time to enter the ministry, and I believe they only meant well by that. I only said I did not feel God's calling, which was in fact true. It was a good answer, for there was no greater authority in my parent's minds than God. As a young adult, when most boys my age were doubtless fantasizing about being a hockey player or an astronaut, I was thinking about being a movie star, a novelist, a journalist, or a short story writer. I even asked my brother, David, who seemed to know the answer to a lot of things.

"Do you think I can be a writer?" I asked one day.

"You can be anything you want, Andrew" he said, or words to that effect.

I imagined I would live in rural New Brunswick and sit on the porch overlooking the Kennebecasis river and write things. I don't remember where I thought all of those words would come from. It doesn't matter now. In a writing class I once took, the professor spoke of the notion of a wounded writer. In my mind I saw the pathetic image of a dazed and bruised individual stumbling through the woods, ink dripping from bulging veins. I am not a wounded writer. All my childhood fantasies are gone now. I am a dead writer.

I recall the moment in my life when I knew I couldn't be my father. It was at my Dad's retirement from St. Lukes. One of the vestrymen was talking to me

and he suddenly stopped and said, "Your father is a great man. Do you know that?"

Something in me changed that day. I knew I could never be a great man. Besides, this was not a world which needed a lot of great men anymore. They seem to be heroic relics from a past time, the stuff of history texts. Anyway, enough is enough. I think he should really retire. I want him to finally clean up his office, sort his books, use his HAM radio more. I do not want him to look forward to orange juice and salty porridge.

I suggest that Curt needs a shave. What about the electric razor in his room? Sorry, no good, hasn't worked in years. There is another one, he says, tucked away in a closet somewhere upstairs. Curt is amazing. The razor hasn't worked in years, and yet is still prominently displayed on his dresser, as if being honored for long service. I fight my way through piles of towels, mismatched linen, loose rolls of toilet paper. I set up the shaver, and get a long orange extension cord. Curt doesn't want to use the mirror. "I go by feel," he says, guiding the razor down his face and smiling.

Curt has moved downstairs; that is, he will be sleeping in the den from now on until such time as he can no longer live at home, can no longer resist the creeping cancer within him. His children bought a hospital bed formerly occupied by a now deceased family friend. Hand-me-downs from the dead. The den has been used as a kind of terminal care room before. Curt's mother, who lived to be 101, spent much of her last six months here. Someone else--an uncle perhaps?--also spent twilight time in that room. There are large black and white pictures on the wall, scenes from ceremonies and family gatherings in the 40s

and 50s. I wonder if he lies there at night when sleep will not come and stares at the pictures, remembering his life.

Depressed individuals often talk of not opening the mail for weeks, or taking the phone off the hook and cutting themselves off from all outside contact. Even going to the bathroom can be a major chore. But for me it was my redemption. Frequent urination was what caused me to see a doctor in the first place. At the time, I had no other symptoms that I was aware of, apart from the beginnings of what would eventually become a profound sleep disturbance. Every night I would wake almost hourly, shuffle to the bathroom, only to be rewarded with a trickle. The doctor called this my red herring; peeing both masked and called attention to the underlying condition of dysthymia.

Now I stand before an open dresser drawer staring at socks that I have never taken the time to match up. For months I have kept on wearing and washing the same three or four pairs, and ignored the rest. I just couldn't sit down and take the time to sort them. Anything that took concentration I would avoid. I have a large collection of CDs and tapes, but I can't choose one I want to listen to. If I'm lucky enough to make a decision, I quickly decide to change my mind. I bought a 5 CD changer and a double cassette deck for just such behavior. But it was mostly a waste of money. I rarely have the concentration to stick with one album more than a few minutes.

Several years ago I decided to buy a mountain bike. I spent six months asking everyone I knew about the best place to buy one, should I buy new or used, and so on. After exhaustive research I chose a small but well-known local dealer, who sold off summer rental bikes at the end of the season. The decision came down to two bikes, identical apart from frame size. It took two hours of

questions and alternate riding before I reluctantly chose the smaller frame. It did fit me better, but somehow seemed too small. Yet the other too big. Driving home I was convinced I had made the wrong decision, but it didn't matter anyway. Once the transaction had been completed, I immediately regretted my decision, thinking I had purchased the wrong bike. After all, I had made the wrong choice in a far more important matter--marrying my now ex-wife. That had been a bad decision, too. It was easy for me to see how a far less important choice could go wrong. So the bike sits in the back shed, in much the same condition as the day I bought it. It still looks too small.

The Effexor dose has been doubled to 150 mg a day. A kind of manic obsessive compulsive intensity sets in. Three nights running I've had four hours sleep. I'm laughing hysterically at my own jokes. I start smoking again. Major side effects kick in: insomnia, dry mouth, cold sweats, decreased appetite, nervousness, constant headaches, constipation. Wasn't I supposed to feel better? I am desperate, believe I am dying, will not survive the night.

I page the doctor.

"What's up?" he says in a disembodied cell phone voice.

"I'm in big trouble," I say. "We need to do something about the dose. I can't take this. Can I drop to one pill at night?"

"Yea, just what I was thinking."

"Do I see you next week as usual?"

"Sounds good."

My headache instantly evaporates. My appetite returns. I devour a can of Alpha Getti, a favorite from childhood, and a piece of half eaten chicken. The

days are a blur. What is this? Tuesday? It's reading week at the university, so no classes. I probably couldn't have made it anyway. I think of things to do. Take out the garbage and recycling. I bid Curt goodnight. He is curled up in his hospital bed, teeth out, looking like Yoda from Star Wars. The den smells of urine and old carpet.

Awake. Anxious. Nervous. I hear Curt downstairs coughing and moaning, moving about in his bed restlessly. A steady rain is pouring down on 4th Avenue, the streetlights reflecting off the shiny asphalt. I am crying. I feel totally helpless, like a bystander watching a man trapped in a burning car. If I can't stop his cancer by writing, I'd be willing to make a deal with God: take away my writing--and let Curt live. Maybe God doesn't make deals, is not a gambler, and would not interfere at this late stage.

I hear Curt cough again, and I fear again he does not have long on this earth. The home care nurse told me she didn't think he would make it to Christmas. Somehow I feel if he can only make it through the winter he will be all right. I want him to have one more summer, to once again feel the warm breeze flow through the front window, or the summer sunlight on his wrinkled face. I want him to be able to watch the leaves reappear on the trees, and the birds coming to feast at our window feeder.

Curt looks and sounds like a tired old man now, humorless and miserable, drinking meal replacement milkshakes for nourishment. The cancer lurking within him has quenched his appetite, and his weight loss is dramatic. I try to pray but the rush of tears make my lips salty and wet, taking me down even further. My own appetite has dropped off again, and it is all I can do to force a small sandwich down. My weight is dropping too--in and of itself a good thing, I

suppose--but I barely have the energy to plod up the long staircase to my room. Alas, I know how Curt feels.

I have noticed a drop--no, a total drop out--in my previous high interest in television. I would often return home from work or school and switch on the set, not with any intention of watching a particular program (although I did, for a time, have a fairly serious addiction to *Law & Order*), but merely to gaze upon the world out there. On the small screen, the world seemed contained and safely at a distance, the events of the day ordered and explained. Vancouver somehow looked better on television than it ever did with my own foggy eyes. Who needed the mountains? What use was this nature? What was the use of the miles of beaches? All the cyclists, slick and postmodern, the beautiful people running, skipping, skiing, jumping, and rollerblading, ever willing to complain about all the rain. Oh it's so terrible. Where is the sun? What, do they think this is California or Arizona? Vancouver is in a rainforest; of course it's going to rain. Morris (1990) has written one of the most satirical essays available about Vancouver. In it she writes:

It never rains in Vancouver---I have been here six times now, so I know this for a fact. Also nobody has to work, nobody is sick, and you can leave your front door unlocked when you go away. Basking in perpetual sunshine, with no commitments, no financial worries, no pressure of competition, and blissfully happy marriages one and all, Vancouver is a city whose inhabitants are people of the Blessed Isles, spared all wars and natural calamities, spared even the miseries of urban decline, political corruption, rush-hour hassle, or juvenile delinquency.

(p. 157)

In real life or on television, I am detached from this rainforest. Upon ingesting Effexor, the daily impulse to surf the sixty or so channels on the tube has gone. I cannot explain this cessation of desire, but it is an interesting commentary on the role television may play in our North American society and culture. If there are indeed a significant number of people on this continent who are depressed, even mildly, then TV may be a kind of visual valium, holding onto and holding together a great many lost souls. Certainly I've known people who practically went through withdrawal symptoms when, because of family or work commitments, they were unable to take their daily fix. I used it in Japan to forget about being there, to imagine another world beyond its shores. Even though the broadcasts were for the most part in Japanese it didn't seem to matter. The visual valium, it seems, takes effect in any language. If television was suddenly banned, would doctors' offices across the country be jammed with crazed clients? Would thousands of seemingly healthy people discover the real role of television? Discover their true (possibly depressed) selves? It would be a tempting experiment. This at least partially explains the presence of so much mindless and otherwise unreflective programming on television. All I know is that watching television is an activity that no longer interests me. For now, the screen remains black, the great blinking box strangely silent.

As the haze of depression gradually began to lift, I decided to join Telepersonals again. That's how I had met Hilary in the first place. Two years ago, when I was new to Vancouver, lonely, brooding about my disintegrating marriage, and eager for companionship, I signed up. I was not into the bar scene, so this seemed as good a way as any of meeting people. Telepersonals is

essentially a voice mail lonely hearts club, with hundreds of voice mail "ads" in a myriad of categories, from long term romantics, to casual dating or intimate encounters, even alternative relationships which features the bondage and s/m crowd competing with sexy couples seeking a third or fourth party to spice things up.

Overall, the ads favor physical descriptions--height, weight, hair color, even type of teeth (own, straight, white, etc.)--with an assortment of women who say they like weekend getaways, music, dancing, bubble baths, long walks on the beach, dogs and cats, dining in or out, and who are, more often than not, seeking someone tall, dark, and handsome (or at least marginally handsome). In my experience, the ads must be digested with a grain of salt, as some women (and presumably some men, too) are given to exaggerating personal characteristics and physical appearance. Almost everyone on the line is attractive, slim, slender, sexy, muscular, considered attractive, and unquestionably desirable. So why do they need this service?

Everyone seems to know the politically correct code to use to communicate, the appropriate discourse of desire. "Full figured" or "voluptuous" means overweight or chubby, "open-minded" seems to mean sexually open, or perhaps intellectually open, although it's hard for me not to let my mind wander to erotic images, depending on the voice. There are nice sounding voices, some sweet or sexy or breathy or innocent or natural or husky, but also ones that reveal too many cigarettes smoked or too much whiskey drunk. Some evenings I just surf the ads, searching for someone who might make my heart pause to listen.

Living together as intimately as father and son, Curt can drive me crazy sometimes with his idiosyncratic habits. Among them is his predilection to emit deafening sneezes not once or twice, but at least eight or nine times in succession, the duration between emissions spent blowing his nose, coughing, uttering several "oh dears" and "damns" for good measure. I usually leave the room when this cacophony begins, not so much for the noise (which would be reason enough for anyone unaccustomed to those ear splitting blasts), but because the pauses between sneezes, the anticipation that wafts through the room, the heavy tension in the air, sends my blood pressure skyward.

I just can't stand sneezing.

Curt is completely deaf in his right ear, and hears only with the help of a hearing aid in his left. Thus, he watches television with the sound so loud it rumbles through the house, penetrating through brick walls as if they were rice paper, permeating my room as no other sound does. As long as I was watching the same channel, I would leave the sound off on my set. Thank God he liked *Law & Order*. Now that I seek silence in the evening, the constant intrusion of his set has put me on edge.

I have bitten my nails for longer than I care to remember. According to my parents, this started when I was about ten years old. The term *habit* doesn't quite communicate the essence of the experience. I don't know what to call it: a desire, obsession, pastime, compulsive urge, self-mutilation, or an indication, as one recent book puts it, of possible serotonin-deficiency? My own obsession, onychophagia, stands among 48 conditions, from anorexia nervosa to

trichotillomania (compulsive hair pulling), that Norden (1996) suggests may possibly respond to serotonin-laced antidepressants.

For no apparent reason, other than the Effexor moving in mysterious ways in my brain, every desire I had to bite my nails has suddenly left me. But it will take several months to get to the stage of actually having nails. Since childhood I chewed them down to the quick, as my father frequently lamented, tearing the nail off with such force that blood would appear. It was painful, but I just kept biting, unable to stop and not knowing why. When I was a kid my father tried bribing me--25 cents a finger--but I lost interest in the money and resumed chewing. In the years since, various family members, friends, even complete strangers have scolded me about my obsession, warning me about deformed fingers, errant germs, and social ostracism, all of which did nothing but cause resentment in me. If I wanted to bite my nails, it's my business, I thought. Even Hilary could not stand the constant click, click, click of my teeth probing for fresh nail. She would often grab my hands and hold them to get me to stop.

But it is over now. For the first time in my adult life nail is creeping over stubby flesh. My hands and fingers seem like foreign objects to me, and do not look like my own anymore. The tips of my fingers feel odd, as if each digit has grown in length, bone and all.

A difficult time with Curt today.

I woke up early, about 6:30, after eight hours of dreamless sleep I don't remember. But I felt fresh, rested, alive. Sleep had improved recently, due only to medication my doctor had prescribed-- 50 mg of Trazadone, to accompany the Effexor and taken just before bedtime. This is more or less standard procedure

with some anti-depressants, as they may cause excitability, agitation, and insomnia. I ate a banana, and began writing an assignment that was due that afternoon. About 8, I took a shower, and suddenly felt tired. I laid down to rest until 9, then resumed writing.

I heard Curt calling from the den.

"Hello....HELLO!!!"

I lean over the banister.

"Are you alright, Curt?"

No answer.

I proceed downstairs. Curt is dressed, sitting in his recliner, looking agitated.

"How about some breakfast around here?" he snaps.

I'm stunned. He has never raised his voice to me in over two years.

"I've been banging on the wall, and shouting, and I left two messages on your machine. Could I get some juice or something?" he adds, irritated.

"All right, all right," I say, not knowing what to say. "I was taking a shower; I didn't hear you."

Curt ignores me, looks straight ahead at the flowers on top of the television. To the kitchen I go, angry and confused. What was happening to our previously respectful relationship? I begin thinking of all the things I've done for Curt over the last two years--shopping, cleaning, vacuuming, washing, repairing, painting, constructing, driving, photocopying, mowing, lugging, lifting--errands and jobs of all sorts, and all done, I believed, because I wanted to do them. How can he treat me this way now? I cook his porridge every morning, measuring the water and salt exactly so he does not complain. I stir and cook, and then carefully

measure out his portion. Curt wants exactly enough to eat, and no more. He gets annoyed if he is given too much and must leave some behind, submerged in the cream.

This ritual is conducted every morning, but I am growing tired of it. Relaxing in my room is almost impossible; I must remain vigilant.

I return to the den.

"Okay, Curt", I say brightly, "Here's your juice. It's only half a glass. Sorry. Ran out of orange juice. Prune is all we have."

I hate prune juice.

I rattle off a long and confusing list of breakfast foods we have on hand-- eggs, muffins, bread, pancakes, yogurt, bananas, cheese....I mention porridge along the way, almost in a whisper, hoping he won't notice, hoping he'll choose something else. I hold my breath.

"Yogurt sounds good, yes, strawberry yogurt," he says finally.

I am victorious. I rush off to the kitchen and return with a cool cup of strawberry yogurt and a shiny spoon. Then I run upstairs to check my voice mail, bracing myself for Curt's angry voice. But there are no messages. Nothing. I sit on my bed, the phone still firmly against my right ear, the drone of the dial tone deafening.

The return of my depression was like an old unwelcome friend dropping by for a visit unannounced and staying too long. I could feel it coming over me, as if my soul had suddenly freed itself and was hovering nearby, observing. My body ached. I know when it has returned as I have learned to recognize the signs. The first hint was several weeks ago, on a Thursday afternoon. All energy and

motivation abandoned me, replaced by sleepy irritation. I didn't want to go to class, in fact couldn't or didn't want to get out of bed. It was only at Hilary's urging that I ventured out to UBC and found a seat. But I wasn't really there. It felt like the flu without nausea. These days I find it difficult to ride the bus, or to walk down the street. I have lived in cities all my life, and yet traffic noise is so deafening I cover my ears. Or wait in the bank until cars pass. Children playing next door sound like they are scurrying between my ears, a distant lawn mower a drill probing my skull. The house is mercifully silent but also empty and deafeningly quiet. The mundane tasks of everyday life--taking out the trash, washing the dishes, sorting recyclable paper and newsprint--seem hopelessly complex and unaccomplishable. Even taking the cap off a tube of toothpaste is challenging. I cannot escape myself, and even the anticipation of sleep brings little relief and many fears: How will I get to sleep? How long will it last? What is it inside my head that wakens me at 4 or 5 in the morning, tears in my eyes?

I will see my doctor again today and he will increase the dosage and we will board this train again--my body, my mind, and I--hoping it will not derail. We will enter the low country, pass large trees on either side, and if I am better I will see not just the shapes of the trees but the leaves and the branches and the trunks and bark. I will see inside these trees, receive the shapes and details in my mind, and know I am well again.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.

St. John 11: 25-26

Curt died on Saturday March 14th 1998, at age 86. He had been admitted to hospital on a Wednesday, only three days before, weak and dehydrated, unable to stand upright without assistance, and becoming violently ill and short of breath if he did. I last spoke with him at about 4:30 PM. I had helped him up to go to the bathroom, but nothing happened. The short trip across the room had drained him of energy. He vomited what little fluid he had in his stomach. He was pale and terribly out of breath. After about 10 minutes he settled down, said he would be okay until his daughter, Theresa, came to visit. I was reluctant to leave him, but I had to go to class. I said good-bye, and promised I'd be back by the time the news was over. Theresa did arrive, and sometime during the early evening decided to call an ambulance. Curt had started to have trouble breathing again. When I arrived home from class the house was eerily silent. A note explained that Curt had been taken to the emergency ward. I rushed to the hospital, but since I wasn't family, a burly nurse prevented my entrance to the ward. I only caught a glimpse of him in the corner of the large brightly lit emergency room, looking small and pale in a blue hospital gown. That was the last time I saw him alive.

As late as Friday evening he had been stable, sitting up in a chair, comfortable, looking better than he had in days. He wasn't peeing, but the swelling had gone down in his feet. He was chatty. The plan was either to send him home again the next week, or better yet, convince him to move in with his wife Doreen. I had mentioned to Theresa I'd visit Curt on Saturday and bring out the paper. But Friday night he took a turn for the worse. His kidneys had ceased to function, and fluid began massing in and around his lungs. The family was asked to come quickly. He was breathing rapidly, out of breath in fact, so much

so he managed only single words between gasps. He was drowning. In the early morning the doctors had given Curt morphine to help slow his respirations. But it didn't seem to help. He was in great distress. Theresa began shuttling back and forth to the nurse's station. You've got to do something! She returned, said help was coming. Curt managed only a short sentence, one of his last:

"Tell...them...to... hurry....up."

Doctors discussed inserting a needle in his chest to drain off the fluid, but it was decided that this would be too painful, and would not help much. Shortly after 9 am he was given another dose of morphine. His agitation subsided and he fell into a peaceful sleep, his family by his side. His breathing gradually slowed.

Curt died an hour later.

All of this was relayed to me second hand, mostly from Theresa, in the hours and days following his death. I had received a phone call at 8:15 that morning from David, her husband. He said they were at the hospital. He used the word *crisis*. But I was confident Curt would pull through. After all, Curt had viewed his illness never as an illness, something terminal and dark, but merely a "bump in the road," or "problems with my legs" or "a sore back" or "can't catch my breath." It was always specific symptoms he referred to, never cancer. I have to love him for that. I have to love him for ordering tulip seeds to be planted. Or getting the house entirely repainted--outside and in--six months ago. Maybe he thought he had the time to spare to watch the paint peel. He certainly believed he would outlive Doreen, that she would go before him.

I felt terribly guilty for not seeing him in the hospital before he died. I'd had a hard time those last days he was home, Curt vomiting whenever he

exerted himself, gasping for air, calling out for me. I remember wishing there was more I could do. It was so bloody obvious he was dying, yet I remained cheery and optimistic, thinking he could make it to the summer, that he might even get better. I never expected him to die so quickly. No one did. Even in the hospital he had bounced back. Up in the chair Friday night, hands behind his head, complaining about the nurses, saying his urinal was too far away, eating toast and drinking fluids. Good ol' Curt. I had wanted to give him a few days to get settled, his family time to see him before the inevitable onslaught of visitors. He'd had a lot in the weeks before, and I felt he needed some space. I had the paper ready to go that morning. I was looking forward to seeing him, thinking about bringing his car around, getting ready to go, when Theresa staggered down the front walk with the news. It haunts me that he died before I got the chance to bring him the paper.

Monday. Two days after Curt's death. Changed the oil in Curt's car today, prepared for a presentation at school, tried to go about my life. I didn't want to think of anything but I kept thinking of him. When I walked into the den downstairs all I could smell was what remained of him, what remained of his things, his life. The hospital bed there in the corner, made neatly, and his new recliner. A lot of pictures around, pictures of smiling people. A few pictures of Curt, but mostly friends and family. The flowers still there on top of the television, ones that were given to him while he was still alive, and many that came later. The family has been flipping through old photo albums that I've never seen, showing me pictures of Curt and Doreen strolling down Granville Street. In those days eager photographers would take your picture, and then

hand you a business card. I can imagine Curt going in the next week to the studio to pick up the prints. People dressed up to go downtown in those days. Dresses for the women. Curt is wearing a full suit with vest, a fedora, and is swinging his arms, his right hand a little blurry, a pipe in his mouth. He is grinning. It looks like a wonderful day.

One week after Curt's death. He's just in the hospital, I tell myself, and will return in a week or two. Just a bump in the road, perhaps problems with his legs that the doctors can fix. Surely his sore back will mend with time. With a bit of oxygen he'll catch his breath. He will return, looking as good as ever, strolling down the front walk, his arms swinging.

March 21st 1998. The day of the memorial service. Clear in the early morning but now clouding over. Rain by noon I suppose. Theresa later said they were tears for her father. Family begin arriving early in the morning, preparing for the reception and get together later in the evening. Gardeners have been by to mow the lawn, and plant flowers in the beds on either side of the house. The service is this afternoon but I feel nothing. I'm going over some writing, some pathetic aborted Japan story that I'm taking another look at, thinking it's only pathetic because I have not fleshed out the sentences, or dwelled on the images. I begin writing notes in the margin. I am talking about a day back in 1989. "That day was one of the first real winter days of the season," I write, "and the freezing temperatures and snow signaled for me another dreaded winter in Montreal."

The service is mostly a blur. It was short, the way Curt would have liked, with a few hymns ("Morning Has Broken" was one of them), the two readings

done by his granddaughter Kathy and his grandson Mike. Theresa read the eulogy, and we all wept.

April. Curt never did come back from the hospital, and I never made it out to see him. I pass the hospital on my way to UBC sometimes, but I never really look at it. Instead, I look at the cherry blossoms, out everywhere, which takes me back to Japan in the early 90s. We used to go down by the river and sit under the trees, drinking sake and eating, *hanami* the Japanese called it. The setting sun would warm our pale faces, and we would once again be thankful for spring.

I think about Curt and wonder if he strolled under the trees with Doreen, holding hands, in the early 40s it would have been, thinking of his future with a girl who had survived the torpedoing of her ship, the British liner *Athenia*, while returning with her mother from England in September 1939. Someone saved the front page from the September 18th 1939 *Vancouver News-Herald*, the headline "Allies to Fight Nazis to Finish." Doreen had written a letter to relatives and friends while on board the American freighter *City of Flint* (a cargo ship carrying 50,000 cases of Scotch whiskey, and one of the ships that participated in the rescue of *Athenia*'s survivors). Her letter home was reprinted in the paper, "Vancouver Girl Tells Horrors of *Athenia* Disaster"; an articulate young woman writing about the explosion, the small boats being lowered into the Atlantic chop, the hours spent rowing the lifeboat toward lights that turned out to be shooting stars. Doreen closes the letter, "Don't know how we are going to come back yet. Have no stockings or shoes, no hat and both of us are covered with bruises. All my love, Doreen."

Curt's wife is still alive, escaping one tragedy in her youth but in her old age falling victim to another: a stroke. She still knew Curt five years ago, her body strong and her mind intact. He went out there twice a day, but soon she grew forgetful and silent, staring at her husband and gripping his hand with all the strength she could muster. They haven't told her, I don't think, and doubt they ever will. Curt always said he would outlive her, that she would go first. But really they are both gone now. The sympathy cards said they were a wonderful couple, as if they were both dead. In a way they are both gone now, strolling together under the most beautiful cherry blossoms in the universe, the sun warming their wrinkled faces.

Chapter III Sotto Voce

Niimi

What I remember about those first few days in August 1990, now a decade past, was how the heat and humidity fell like a gentle smothering blanket upon everything and everyone. The sun, unencumbered by clouds, scorched my pale skin and threatened to blind me with its brilliance. Japan. The Chinese characters meant the source of the sun. I felt like Icarus, venturing too close to the sun, shedding feathers as the wax melts. But there was no fall to terra firma. Day or night, there was no comfort, only the sound of strange buzzing insects in the trees.

How I ended up in Japan is a story in itself. One cold winter day in 1989, my brother Peter called me on the phone. I was living in Montreal at the time. I had a nice apartment, an interesting job in radio, but I was bored and restless. It was unusual to get a call from Peter, as he seldom called and never wrote.

"I was looking in the paper the other day," Peter began, "and I saw something, and thought of you."

That was the first time I had heard of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET), in which the government of Japan invited thousands of native English speaking foreigners into the halls and classrooms of public schools to teach with Japanese English teachers. I applied, but thought a Top 40 DJ with no previous interest in Japan and no language ability would have little chance. Yet less than a year later I found myself leaning over the balcony of a tiny apartment in a small town in the Chugoku district of Western Japan. Niimi had 25000 Japanese people and one foreigner--me. Later, I learned there was one other

foreigner--Jenny--who lived in town, and another woman (also married to a Japanese man) who lived out beyond the mountains to the north, in Osa. But I was the only Canadian there, and--to my knowledge--the first foreign man who had ever lived in Niimi. The story of the naming of this town came from a famous Japanese explorer, who came upon this city and decided to call it "new seen city." This tale, and many other details about the town, were related to me by my first supervisor, a toothy and bespectacled man by the name of Mr. Fukuda. In those early days in Japan I was given to finding out the meaning of people's names. I looked for clues in their names as to their personality. Several years later I remember writing Mariko's name on a slip of paper and posting it in my apartment. Japanese family names usually consist of two kanji characters, those complicated ideographs that were brought to Japan from China. Fukuda, it turns out, meant *happy ricefield*. Another supervisor, my favorite, was named Norimoto, which roughly translated as *rule book*. My system of personality prediction had little validity, however, as Fukuda was more like a rule book, telling me what I could and could not do, expecting me to inform the school of my whereabouts on the weekends I left Niimi. Norimoto was the happy one, curious and friendly, quirky for a Japanese. After all this time the names and the people still stick in my mind: Abe, Fujimoto, Honda, Ikeda, Ishihara, Izuishi, Kataoka, Konishi, Matsumoto, Nakajima, Nakamura, Ogino, Okada, Ono, Satoru, Suzuki, Tanaka, Taniguchi, Tao, and Yamamoto.

My two supervisors helped me move into my new place, a small two room apartment. I had rejected their original choice as being too far from school and way too small (besides, it didn't even have a kitchen). I suppose they assumed that, like most Japanese men, I didn't or couldn't cook, and would eat out most of

the time. The apartment I chose looked like every room had been designed by a different architect. The bathroom was out of a Boeing 747, the kitchen from a Coleman camping trailer, the first room perhaps the most Western, except for rice paper and wood doors and broad, deep closets with flimsy doors. The front room was the most Japanese in style, with straw tatami mats covering most of the floor, which gave the room a rich hayloft aroma. There were no curtains, so I removed the two sliding doors from the closet and used them as light and sun blockers. The school had thoughtfully provided a bar fridge and, upon my insistence, a mini-washer spinner contraption, which succeeded in only tying my clothes in knots. I eventually bought a double gas stove, and used it as a heater in the frosty mornings of that first winter, both burners blazing wildly as I fixed breakfast. My "bed" was a slim mat, for which I paid too much, and which barely extended beyond my chubby feet. It was nowhere near as thick or comfortable as futons are in the West, and did not have a frame.

As I learned that first winter in Niimi, most of Western Japan's residential buildings are not blessed with central heating. Instead, as in most of the schools I visited, kerosene stoves of various sizes and vintages were used to provide heat. In a country where you can set your watch by the train, where taxi drivers don white gloves and uniforms, where arranging flowers is an art form, and where high tech gadgets of all descriptions are commonplace, it was difficult to understand why a more workable heating situation had not been found. I concluded that the Japanese, so fond of hardships, of sacrifice, dedication, groupism, had logically decided to freeze together. Mind you, the kerosene stoves available for sale at the local hardware store were sleek, beautiful devices,

with auto start timers, low fuel alarms, temperature controls, and auto shutoff detectors for earthquakes. It wasn't too long before I bought one.

The years raced by in Japan. Each year a new contract would appear on my desk at school, and for two years running I renewed. Later I would joke that I went for one and stayed for four. I think of it as a different lifetime, a different life, where days trickled down like water from a melting glacier. I wondered if some subsequent explorer might find my frozen body, 75 years hence, emaciated and well-preserved, the first white man of Niimi.

Enter Prozac

I am still fighting the depression, or it is still fighting me, if fighting is the right word. If it is a biological aberration, some malfunction in my neurotransmitters, how *can* I fight it? I am dependent on these expensive oddly-shaped pills. Can the Effexor really help me? Karp (1996) discusses his own hostility and lingering doubts about the "medical model" of depression--the notion that this condition is chiefly neurochemical and biological in nature. This idea is greedily and aggressively pushed by the drug companies, supported by numerous psychiatrists and physicians, and believed by a public in search of relief and a quick fix. Searching for his own answers, Karp writes:

My own view--rooted in personal experience, listening to others, a life-time of reading social science, and what seems common sensically true--is that depression arises out of an enormously complicated, constantly shifting, elusive concatenation of social circumstance, individual temperament, and biochemistry.

(p. 79)

I keep thinking back through my life, searching for answers, causes, events, feelings, stresses, information, *anything* that might inform me of the origins of this disease. I may have been dysthymic from my teenage years onward, and adapted to this, in actual fact became so used to my dysthymic self that I no longer recall my real self, the true me. The events of the past few years clearly brough on the latest slide. There was those three months I spent languishing in a ramshackle dive in Okayama City hoping for a job, wishing that things (Mariko, my marriage, money, hope) would come back, and the following six winter months in New Brunswick with my parents. There was yet another dismal six months spent teaching at a language school in Pusan, South Korea, from which I was asked to leave and given a generous settlement. This all seemed to indicate the source of the major depression, the extra depression on top of the dysthymia. All this pointed to why it happened, but not to how it happened, the specific intimate detail, the exact decisions, the step by step asphyxiation of my soul. Another man may have experienced these events and emerged shining, confident, with an *anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger* grin on his face. But not me. I fell, collapsed, caved in, succumbing to the weight of events and circumstance.

Karp continues:

...those with depression may find even the simplest tasks and rituals of daily life impossible. Even in its more benign forms, depression shapes how a person plans for and moves through each day. In the longer term, depression nearly always influences how people think about critical choices related to careers, friendship, and family. (p. 105)

I had an assignment due yesterday, but it took me nearly all weekend to assemble five pages, a task that previously would have been accomplished in an

evening's work. In a haze, I read assigned journal articles, but comprehend little, the words flying by empty of meaning and significance. The end of semester course work is piling up, but I worry that the depression may become worse, like that Thursday a few weeks ago, and I will be unable to complete the semester on time. I must be careful not to overtax my senses, avoid places contaminated with too much noise, slip in and out of the house at odd hours to avoid the daily grind of this busy city.

One of the first antidepressants to receive media attention was Prozac. It made patients well, ameliorated the depression, but also seemed to alter basic personality characteristics.³ The question of whether this second effect is merely a pharmacological bonus or a dark vision of the future is still being debated. The fact that SSRI drugs help the depressed with few of the side effects of older antidepressants is, to my mind, reason enough to consider taking the medication. However, SSRIs tend to have an unpredictable global effect on personality, ushering the patient into a state so altered that many claim to feel "better than well." For a few days in February I too had felt like I'd never felt before in my life. An indescribable joy and peacefulness, an exhilarating wellness, possessed me. But since then I have slid down somewhat, but mostly sideways, constantly questioning the efficacy of Effexor. Developments in psychopharmacology notwithstanding, the precise reasons one drug seems to work better than another, why Paxil might work better than Zoloft for a given patient, is not yet clearly understood. Psychiatrists rely on scientific information, drug profiles, experience with other patients, and their own lengthy training to make decisions

³For a more complete discussion, see *Listening to Prozac*, page 10.

about what drug might suit their clients, but there is also plenty of guesswork. Why my doctor chose Effexor--usually prescribed only after the failure of more mainstream SSRIs--I do not know. Could it be that he had a large physician's sample supply tucked away in his office? Was it, as the good doctor had joked, just the flavor of the month? For me, I prefer to think of his decision as purposeful rather than arbitrary, but I suspect it was a bit of both.

The disturbing thing about depression is its aloofness. If I had a broken leg, or merely a cut on my finger, at least I could see it, see the source of pain, and somehow fight it. But how can you fight that which is unseen? Depression is ultimately a cowardly condition, lurking in the shadows of the psyche, the dark places in the soul, revealing only parts of itself to the victim, but also taking away insight to fully reflect on and deal with its ugly presence. What do you look like? Where do you hide when you are not with me? What odor do you have? Come out! Show yourself!

Don't be afraid.

Restlessness

It is difficult to assess my depression now, as I have days in which I feel "better than well", or at least better, but also more days than I feel are necessary (considering the high cost of the drug and the duration I have been taking it), in which I find myself mentally roaming the fog of my home town once again, face wet, mind disoriented, spirits flown. I used to look out my bedroom window as a child across the empty church parking lot and be amazed at the soupy mist that would roll down the street, cars passing as dark shadows with their headlights cutting narrow beams of light in the blackness. When I was older I would

sometimes hide in the darkness waiting for my mother to go to her night job at the hospital. It was then I felt truly safe. My father would be downstairs in his enormous study, perhaps preparing a sermon or writing letters to the bishop. It was a heady time in those days, fundamentalism raging, the Praise The Lord Club's Jim Bakker not quite to the point of temporary psychosis and permanent bankruptcy. Home from school for lunch, I found myself giving my soul to Christ during one of those broadcasts. I had finally given in, finally "gave my life to Christ", so dramatic, so completely different from the Anglican way.

Now I am back in that hazy blindness once again.

Back in the early 80s in Fredericton, starting a degree in English and Psychology, I had frequently felt nervous, embarrassed, anxious, uncomfortable with women, men, even being in my own skin. I hated walking into the cafeteria; all eyes felt like they were upon me. This was the great irony for me: feeling alone at the center of attention. I was always down on myself, self-deprecating in the way some comics tend to be, painfully aware that inside something was not right. That first year I remember accidentally dropping a favorite coffee mug on the hard tile floor, shattering it into pieces. My roommate, Mark, came back to find our residence room darkened, pieces of the mug on the floor, and me flat in bed morbid and morose, unable to sleep. I was uncomfortable with myself; my identity seemed hopelessly ambiguous and distant. Fifteen years later, I'm still searching.

I know I am well when I'm not thinking about depression; rather, I find myself thinking about happiness, goals, accomplishments, failures, fear, dreams, the purposeful and random movement of life. I think about how fortunate I've

been to meet the people I've met, to at least tolerate myself. I still shed tears from time to time; they are often poignant ones of joy, or recollections of people I knew that likely I'll never see again. Living in Japan brought with it an overwhelming sense of loss. Loss of my own country and language, and also loss of friends both at home and ones in Japan I would not see again. Finally, I had to accept that my being (and my health) could not endure another stint abroad, that staying in one place longer than a year or two was not such a bad thing after all.

When I first moved to Vancouver, the thought of staying any longer than a few months made me almost sick with anxiety. I felt I should be on the move. To that end, days after arriving in Vancouver, I started having interviews for jobs in Japan that came up in the paper. As a backup, I went to a university travel agent to enquire about a ticket to Bangkok, and called the Thai consulate to check on entry visas. Time was running out; I had to get out of oppressively rainy miserable alienating Vancouver. To hell with the mountainous vistas! I had to move.

Even as a youngster, blissfully unaware of the ways of the world, I wanted to be a traveller. I would journey from town to town, taking odd jobs, and moving on when the mood struck and the anxiety became too much. Such a dream did not include a family (I never imagined needing one) or long-term friends. The whole scenario was based on one thing: movement away. But now I ask myself: Away from what? What was I running from? Where was I running?

In one sense, I have lived that sort of life, leaving for Japan with no real idea of why I was going or what I would do after. There was really no after, no thought of a future because for me the future did not exist. With a sly grin on her

face, my mother would often remind me that some people think they're going to get out of this world alive. God can call us anytime. Who's to say we will be alive tomorrow? I must be saved if I wanted to go to heaven, my mother said, and there was no reason not to go. I lived within a cloud of spiritual foreboding; obey your father and mother, the Bible said, so that your days might be long on this earth. And if I didn't? God help me.

This view of life seeped into my psyche. Personal goals seemed irrelevant and ridiculous to me. If I could envision a life, I thought, then it was not worth living. By the time I left Japan, first in July 1994 and then again in December of the same year, I was in emotional freefall, well into a depressive and pessimistic state that would last for years. I had passed my best before date. I was out of options. Looking back now it all seems clear: I was desperately ill of mind and soul, barrelling down a bleak tunnel of darkness. I remember the return to Canada so clearly. I was in the Kimpo airport in Seoul, feeling anxious as I do in airports, shuffling about on the second level, looking at the arrivals and departures board, on the verge of tears. I spoke to one of the Korean Air representatives, and received permission to stay in the Skypass Lounge, normally reserved for 1st class passengers. There was an unlimited supply of airline food, which nobody much bothered with, and an open bar. International businessmen would shuttle back and forth fueling up with Johnny Walker, vodka, beer. I was feeling particularly unwell. I didn't want to face going back to Canada, to my parent's home in New Brunswick. Christmas was three weeks away, but I only wanted to die.

I could taste the salt from the tears as they flowed down my face and detoured to my lips. I sat dazed and emotionally fragile, slumped in a corner

couch. Fuck the Skypass Lounge. Fuck everything. I drank screwdrivers and clutched my camera bag. Several Korean air attendants asked what was wrong. I requested a dictionary and looked up the word heart. I said it was my heart. I didn't feel well. I meant a broken heart, a damaged heart, one barely beating, excised of meaning or worth. Several minutes later a doctor (or was she a nurse?) appeared, and proceeded to take my blood pressure. They thought I was having a heart attack. I guess you could have called it that.

I flew to Toronto, then onto Montreal to visit my brother. The last leg of the journey was on a train to the East coast. It was a cold and overcast December morning, snow slowly coming down, the train jolting and shaking, making its way through the West side, the pulp mill yards, across the Reversing Falls bridge, steel wheels screaming. Because my father was busy with services that morning, my mother picked me up at the train station in our blue Subaru wagon. I dragged the luggage through the snow to the car, feigning pleasure at having finally arrived. It was the beginning of six long, dark months.

Bangkok

"You've got to get out of here," the man said. "If you don't you'll end up like those guys on the street."

Bangkok, Thailand. I am standing in the lobby of the swanky Miami Hotel, its decor stuck in a 60s time warp. It is a year later: December 1995. Almost Christmas. There is no festive Christmas tree in sight. The air is thick with heat and humidity. Several sweaty-looking porters are in the corner by the pop machine, smoking and laughing. The front desk staff are busy behind the tattered desk. I am almost dead.

The man's name is Eddie Karnes, a minister from the Northwest United States. He was talking about the men who would hang around the Sukhumvit strip late at night, drunk and disgusted with the world. They'd been here too long, were jaded and regarded Bangkok and its inhabitants with intense disdain. They'd seen all the sights, been with all the prostitutes, visited all the transvestite bars, and had more than once fallen unconscious and completely inebriated in the alley, a whisky bottle jagged and broken beside them. I remember one gentleman--from Australia by the accent--who had raised drunkenness to a fine art. He was missing a few teeth, but smiled just the same.

I asked him what he was doing in Bangkok.

"Fuck all," he replied, "like everybody else in this fucking place."

I asked him what line of work was he in.

"Hats", he said, adjusting his own smartly. "I bring them in from bloody Korea. Big fucking mark up."

He was flanked by several older prostitutes who seemed vacant, sipping their Singha beer and chain smoking cigarettes from the hat man's pack. I told him I'd just come from Korea, and they certainly seemed to have a lot of everything there, including hats.

Back in the lobby of the Miami. I am chatting with a retired man in his 70s from Michigan. I asked him if his wife was with him.

"My wife's waiting for me in a cemetery in Chicago," he replied. "I loved my wife. I still do. We were married 49 years, 11 months, 16 days." He's been coming to the Miami for 10 years, he said, and why the hell not?

"My kids come over, my grandkids. I spend 3 months a year here."

I've been here barely a week, and have been fascinated by the Miami's receptionist. She is pleasant and efficient, speaks English clearly enough, and is always impeccably dressed. But there is something very odd about her, something not quite right. Her hair is beautiful, long and shiny. She has a distinctive high voice, wonderful teeth, great makeup. It was only after a week that I solved the mystery.

I'd been to a part of town renowned for great strip bars and Thai kickboxing. Sitting down to have a meal one night, I was joined by an attractive Thai woman, who turned out to be the manager of the dance bar nearby. Her sole purpose, I guess, was to entice me into the bar, which, given my euphoric state, was child's play. After several drinks I asked her which of her girls spoke English well. A rather more homely girl than I would have liked slid in beside me at the booth. I ordered another overpriced drink for me and one for her. Back out at the café, we were being served by a slim and attractive waitress. But again I got that same feeling I'd had in the Miami.

"Is she really.....a he?" I whispered.

"Oh yes but...don't say anything."

Several nights later, my last night in Bangkok, I found myself back at the transvestite bar in Soi Cowboy. I arrived late. The bar was closing. I am standing on the second floor balcony which surrounds the yard. An attractive transvestite comes out of the bar and asks what I am reading.

"The want ads," I say.

S/he does not understand, but keeps looking at the opened newspaper.

"Well, these are companies looking for workers," I say, adopting my best English teacher demeanor, "And I am looking for a job. A job, you know. Work."

The light of comprehension moves across her face.

"Ah work work. I am not work now. I go."

Six hours to go before my flight to Seoul, and then to Vancouver, a flight I've booked and changed half a dozen times. I do not want to go home. I do not want to go anywhere. As I sat on the street back in front of the hotel, drinking Singha with the other losers, I took one last look around. Two weeks 'till Christmas. Eddie's words reverberated in my mind.

"You've got to get out of here...You've got to get out of here."

Today would be the day I would finally escape.

Money For Nothing

In order to be a traveller, I would need a Volkswagen Beetle, a simple one like those first manufactured in 1938, and sleep in the tiny space under the rear window. I would travel across North America, observing the human condition. My early efforts in this regard involved writing long, reflective letters to friends I met at Sea Cadet summer camps. I started a newspaper at my high school: *The Nameless Newsletter*. I wrote entertainment and school news. My first girlfriend, Judy, who was in the art program, wrote fashion. My parents knew I was a good writer, but Mum felt I needed a steady source of income to support myself, a "real" job as it were; nursing, the ministry, or joining the military were all suggested, the latter as I had spent six happy and successful years in sea cadets, rising to the highest rank: Chief Petty Officer First Class. The Chief. But being a leader didn't interest me much, except it gave me a lot of time to walk around

and see what everyone was doing. I wanted to entertain, to study something important and worthwhile, to be inward and reflective. When I became too old for sea cadets I went over to the naval reserves, but stayed only a few months. These guys were serious. Talk of war, preparation, the enemy. I got out.

Around the same time, I started working weekends and summers at the local hospital. The money was good, but the staff were mostly female, and I felt embarrassed, uncomfortable, and awkward much of the time. I tried to please the nurses, was good with the patients, but I was often bored or just disoriented. I wasn't properly trained, and was really more interested in using the time to read or write. I recall working on the neurosurgery ward and someone stealing my copy of *Pickwick Papers*. I bought a better Penguin edition which I still have. Mum worked nights in the psychiatric unit, and I would go to work with her. She had a large bag, full of I don't know what--books, inspirational cassettes, knitting--though I can't recall ever seeing her knit. She wasn't the knitting type. Besides, any knitting that began to take shape our dachshund, Max, would retrieve from my Mum's bag and unravel around the house.

As a child thief, shoplifting dinky toys at the dumpy Woolworth's in the Fairview Plaza, the world was a different place. It was an open mall, a bizzare idea for a region where the winter temperature often dropped to -20 celsius. Time for a stroll, dear. Mind the frostbite. At the time I wasn't interested in much else besides bolstering my collection of Hot Wheels miniature cars and building models of World War Two battleships. I had a plastic Hot Wheels carrying case--in the shape of a tire, naturally--that I filled with hot dinky toys. I always went

with friends, as there was safety in numbers. It was the thrill of the hunt, sneaking behind the displays, past the long restaurant with its sickly smell of overdone burgers and french fries, through titillating displays of lingerie and panties and bras, past the cheap polyester pants that the ample women of the neighbourhood favored and into the toy section. We had big winter jackets that would hold as many as we dared to steal. I'd take the cars out of the packages, careful not to make much noise, and load my pockets. A little bitter woman who worked there would eye me suspiciously and sometimes say, "Let me look in your pockets," but my friends and I would already be out the door and into the cold winter air. She never followed, and I was never caught. The thing is, you didn't really have to catch me; I would have readily confessed to my crimes, feeling guilty as sin. Punishment, when it was handed down, was sometimes severe. I remember in elementary school receiving the strap from the principal, but those occasional forays into disobedience paled in comparison to the meter stick. It only happened a few times that I can remember, but I will never forget it.

The worst beating occurred after I gave away my mother's coin collection to a black kid at school named Joe. He had been threatening me, or bribing me, or both. He said if I paid him money he would leave me alone, and protect me from other tough guys. At that time I tended to get on the nerves of tough guys, who didn't like my verbal comebacks and nerdy glasses. *Four eyes*, they used to call me. In exchange for whatever amount of money I could raise, Joe offered protection and security. It sounded like a good deal, so I agreed.

My mother's coin collection was in an old puzzle box upstairs in my parent's bedroom. I never got the impression she was a fastidious coin collector, as some of the coins and bills were just haphazardly placed in the box. On the

other hand, some of the bills had their own plastic envelopes or pouches. At any rate, I took the whole thing to school and gave it to Joe. The next thing I remember is sitting on the love seat in the living room, confessing to my crime, and my mother crying "Oh no" or "Oh my God" and looking up at the ceiling.

My father took me to the police station in the new City Hall building, and I was left sitting in a large, mostly unoccupied room, wondering if I would be jailed or sent away. It was in the summer and still light when we arrived there in the early evening. Most of the detectives had gone home, except for one who sat in a large office with my father, his head bobbing up and down as my father sat motionless, his back to me. Around the room there were pictures of Canada's most wanted; surly-looking individuals whose likenesses probably didn't do them justice. It was the first and only time I was in a police station.

When my father took me home I was beaten with the meter stick. Canada was in the process of switching over to the metric system, and fresh new sticks were plentiful. I had to go into my parent's bedroom and show my steadily rising bruises to my mother. I vividly recall she was lying in bed, food-encrusted glasses perched on the end of her nose, reading the Bible. I don't recall any words that were spoken. My mother was understandably heartbroken for losing the coins, and I will never forgive myself for that cruel deed. The police said there was no way to track down those coins; they were long gone, all over the city. We never saw them again. Twenty-five years later, I still feel those bruises on my backside and legs when I see coin collections in store windows or advertised on The Shopping Channel. My body turning instinctively to show the marks, I can only look away.

The Resurrection and the Life

One of the books in my life that was most influential was *The Book of Common Prayer*. Every Sunday, from as far back as I can remember, I was there with my family in the pew at St. Lukes. The Anglican service in our church was often *The Order of Morning Prayer*, a spiffy and wonderfully textured collection of prayers, psalms, collects, gospels, confessions of faith, and thanksgivings, serving as a kind of generic one-size-fits-all service. I have taken part in that service hundreds and hundreds of times, and remember much of its rich language as if it were my own voice:

Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness.

(p. 4)

And onto the general Confession, with its splendor:

Almighty and most merciful Father, We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, We have offended against thy holy laws, We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.

(p. 4-5)

The *Order for the Burial of the Dead* was also a most moving service, filled with appropriate passages from the Bible. "We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out," goes the verse from Timothy. "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (p. 592). When the sextant was away, my father often called upon me to stand guard at the rear of the church during funerals. I will never forget my father's powerful voice as he lead the casket into the church, saying, "I am the resurrection and the

life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (p. 591). It is an indelible memory, the slow movement of the casket towards the nave, my father's voice filling the church.

As a result of these early experiences, death and dying was no stranger to me. Though I had been spared the trauma of the death of a close family member, I had nevertheless been around the dear departed since childhood, when I would, in the course of being with my father, accompany him to funeral homes. I learned that some of the nicest men worked as undertakers and funeral arrangers. One of my favorite funeral homes was Brennan's, a White House-like structure with an address, believe it or not, on Paradise Road. The men were always so impeccably dressed, the big Fords and Lincolns so deep black and clean. Stepping beyond the white pillars and into the deep carpets I was overcome by a hushed, surreal atmosphere of stillness. My most vivid memory is that of the death of Jamie Murphy, a boy older than me by several years, the oldest son of an active parish family headed by Bernie and Fran. Bernie was a short, feisty fun fellow who used to say to me, "How is your little pin head?", in the kindest tones imaginable. He had a strange deformed thumb, possibly acquired in the war, and he was always saying how he had begged the army doctors to cut it off. Early one Sunday morning, before dawn, my father received a call from the police: one of the Murphy boys had been killed in a car accident. At the funeral home, Jamie was laid out in a suit, his dad standing next to him patting him on the shoulder. Fran was sitting nearby, in shock. I remember standing in front of her saying how sorry I was, and Fran fiddling with the buttons of my suit jacket. It was so very sad.

Also in the car had been my friend Harry Forrestal, who by the grace of God escaped with a broken leg. We attended St. Thomas University together, and wrote news and articles for the student newspaper, *The Aquinian*. I remember talking to Harry on crutches and his leg in a cast, saying I had known Jamie. If Harry had been sitting in the front passenger seat, then he would have been the one to die. Instead, he is now the London business reporter for CBC Newsworld.

When I was 16 or 17 and began working at a hospital, I witnessed many deaths. My most vivid memory is of a man wearing a dressing gown and pajamas and talking on the phone at a nurses' station. Suddenly he gasped, dropped the phone, and fell to the ground. By this time I was standing over him, my eyes riveted to his face. He was in seizure, turning cyanotic, his false teeth chattering and then coming loose completely. They tried to revive him, shocking his heart with a defibrillator, pumping vial after vial of sodium bicarb into his system, but they couldn't bring him back. I've always wondered who he was talking to. What would it be like to be chatting on the phone, and then have the voice on the other end inexplicably fade to silence? What would be left? It must be something close to losing your writing voice, or not thinking you have one to start with. My mother was right. We can be called at any time.

My mother was incredibly kind to people. If she liked you, you knew it. Her generosity and warmth could fill a room. She has a wonderful laugh, and would at a moment's notice serve pieces of apple, blueberry, rhubarb pie, whatever was on hand, to people who dropped by for a visit. Twice during my youth, my parents had welcomed an aging man named Charles Miller into our house. We gave him a room in the corner, and got him a TV and a crackling

smoke eater to tackle the smell of Craven "A" menthols he puffed obsessively. Charles had been raised by a stern, authoritarian father by the name of Usher, and had spent the later part of his life in psychiatric institutions on account of his nerves. Our family looked after him well, and I believe he had a tolerable if not enjoyable life in our home. We lived in the North End of Saint John, in a large brick rectory built in 1911. The church was on one side, a bank on the other. And there were a smattering of stores up the street: Welsford's, Martin's, Maritime Electronics (where I got my first job at 16), and Hoffman's, an upscale clothing store. Mum and I would go in there in the fall and we (or rather she) would look at regular pants and then ask, "Do you have this in a husky?", as I sank in the chair. Husky. It was a good word for me.

Welsford's was a funny little place, part drug store, part local hangout, featuring one of those long black soda counters out of the 50's with women from an even earlier era dressed in identical outfits cooking greasy foods and making milkshakes. Down back was the pharmacy, back in the days when all pharmacists were men with bifocals smelling of cheap cologne and strong mouthwash. Charles would put on his long coat and hat and shuffle out to the front step, where you could see the harbor and the Atlantic Ocean, and stand there, the wind blowing the tails of his coat around. My brothers and I called him The Sentinel. Charles used to hang out at Welsford's, as he had grown up in the North End and probably had done so when he was younger. He would give me money to buy cigarettes, and I would get them and sometimes be angry at him and throw the change around his room. Charles would play records in his room; "I'm a mood listener" he would say--Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, the upstairs of my house filled with that rich gentle music. Charles would also hang out at the

local fire station, stopping to talk with the firemen polishing their trucks and waiting for fires.

Charles died in that room one Saturday morning when I was in my teens. I had a weekend job as an orderly at the hospital where my Mother worked, and I had come home about 7:30 in the morning from the nightshift. Dad was up and making breakfast. We had an intercom between the kitchen and Charles' room, and I remember my Dad speaking into it asking Charles if he was up and ready for breakfast. I went to bed before Charles came down. Maybe 20 minutes later I was by then fast asleep when Mom and Dad came into my room and told me Charles had died. It was one of the oddest scenes. Charles had apparently been up and dressed, and had sat down on his bed to put on his shoes. He then collapsed into the side table, squatting in front with his head sideways on the table. Stone dead. Dad and I lifted him off the table and placed him on his back. My Mum must have called the police, for they arrived quickly, two big burly chaps with trenchcoats and well-fed faces. They stood around the body, chatting with Mum and Dad. I asked why they had to come and not just the ambulance. One replied, "We're just checking to make sure there's no knives sticking out of him." The ambulance finally arrived, and Charles was taken away on a stretcher by two attendants, taken down the hallway and down the big wide stairs of the rectory and out to the truck. Parishioners brought food around, and there was a general feeling of loss. Sometime later, I went back to sleep.

My mother grew up in Nova Scotia, on a farm in a valley surrounded by low graceful mountains studded with trees. I can recall visiting it as a child. On that day, there wasn't much remaining of the barn, even less of the house. Old

weathered boards, a sagging roof, grass growing in the kitchen through weathered glassless window frames. My Dad wouldn't let me walk inside for fear of the whole thing spontaneously collapsing. The home was there, too, now merely a pile of faded lumber and rusty nails.

Mum said, "Dad used to come home and try to back the car into the garage. He'd often back into something 'cause he was drunk and then we'd hide because he would lose his temper and beat us."

I'd asked several times about her childhood there, but she always gave the same vague and frustrating answer: "Andrew, he was a drunk..." she would say in disgust, her face losing expression and her voice trailing off to silence. I sensed it was unwise to push further for details, though I desperately wanted to know more. Perhaps knowing more would explain her, give her a past I could reflect on, maybe be proud of in the way my friends would seem when they talked about their grandparents. Mum's silence sheltered something dark and painful and long buried, better left unearthed. She still had a spinster sister in Ontario that she would complain about but nonetheless faithfully call and drive up to see once a year. Mum had a brother I had met, too. Joe was only occasionally sober, and lived in a shabby trailer in Kentville, near where they grew up. He had inherited most of the homestead, but apparently had sold it for a pittance while intoxicated. That's all I know. She never talked much about her mother, or her father beyond the alcoholism. I hear she was a nice woman terribly abused by her husband.

Contact with uncles and aunts and cousins was never maintained, save for my Aunt Rita (Mom's sister) in Millbrook, Ontario. My parents go up to visit her once or twice a year, and have been doing so for a long time. Rita is exactly 10

years older than Mum, but they sound alike on the telephone. Family relations remain a kind of mystery for me, vague and undefined. In Vancouver for almost four years now, I rarely see anyone in my family, although I have pleasant weekly telephone conversations with my parents from their home in Gondola Point. We talk about the weather, how my thesis is going, and my prospects for work, love, and happiness.

I find it hard to believe that a year ago, in the throes of my depression, I somehow believed that I had been adopted, and was not a true born son of my father. Depression can be accompanied by a multitude of distorting mental maladies, including anxiety, paranoia, psychosis and feelings of disconnection, all of which serve to alienate the depressed from the grounding influences of family and friends. Critical cognitive functions and beliefs fall by the wayside, and one is left to question who you are and all that is around you.

Chapter IV

I Can Hear You Writing

The Map Is Not the Territory

Students face a clean page or a blank screen. There are no voices, just the empty echo of voicelessness. Facing this nothingness, where is one to go?

As a writer, one type of seemingly innocent and helpful advice has always bothered me: make a plan. I recall a shop teacher from Lorne Junior High School, a Mr. Keirstead, urging us to *plan your work and work your plan*. For some students, making a plan, a map of what is to be written, is one way to go. It's comforting, it saves time, and it makes intuitive sense. Indeed, many writing texts encourage the writer to start with a plan, any plan, to get things going. Flower (1981) in her *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing* notes that "a plan states how you intend to get there, and lets you test alternative courses of action...it is cheaper to build than the real solution would be" (p. 61). Flower also notes, and I agree, that overly rigid planning can give the writer tunnel vision.

Planning does sound like a good idea, and as educators and instructors, teaching writing-as-plan feels teacherly, pedagogical, and safe. I am not suggesting that planning is wrong or necessarily suspect. However, there is another kind of writing, a different kind of writing, not born of carefully constructed introductory paragraphs, subsequent textoids of logical development, supporting arguments, and finally a paragraph of conclusion. This sequence is attractive for educators because it gets everyone moving, started, writing, and is, in a word, teachable, logical, easily sequenced and presented. Furthermore, it is what is expected in educational and academic circles. You

would not do very well in some college or university courses if you had no idea how to write a five or ten paragraph essay.

It has a step one, a step two, and so on. This is akin to an Ikea version of writing. But those sheets of paper that accompany the pristine pressboard reflect an assembly sequence that is often tediously flawed. I once happily pounded a plastic dowling into the back of a dresser drawer, only to have it emerge in the front and sink right into the carpet. Oops. The mapped instructions reveal the procedure, the carefully thought out sequence of steps, but they do not reflect the dramatic event of assembly. I often painstakingly study Ikea instructions, searching for the hidden meaning, the subtext, the voice and tone of the designer, but am just as often disappointed. Such step-by-step instructions reflect a cultural and technological belief that all experience is solvable, that solutions will come.

There exists another kind of writing that starts with the same blank screen, empty page, scrap of paper. Perhaps the instructor may suggest to everyone an idea or theme, or even a first sentence. I was in a writing class once where the instructor did just such a thing. The idea was to write about bread. Bread? I'd never been trained to write about bread. What was the plan? I knew nothing. Was I to pursue research into this most yeasty topic? No. Just write about bread, the instructor said, just about what you know now, what you remember. Here's what came out:

When I was a kid my father baked bread. Not all the time, and certainly not every day, but on certain Saturday mornings he would rise early, filling the house with a sweet aroma. I seem to remember shuffling downstairs to the kitchen and seeing loaves everywhere, some baked, some kneaded and rising before being placed in the oven. My brothers and I would slice and savor that bread, smothering each toasted slice with enough butter to clog half the arteries on our block. If you were quick

with the knife the butter would liquify, melt through to the plate, leaving a buttery, bready imprint on our dishes. I have consumed much bread since that time--from Texas to Newfoundland, Tokyo to Halifax--but none has ever tasted so good as my father's aromatic bread.

--March 5th 1998

Not bad for a Pillsbury Dough Boy writer. Being careful not to exaggerate or oversell my own work, I would describe this kind of writing as voicefull; rich in a human voice, one remembering the past in the present. Naturally, if a student were given the topic of, say, political developments in pre-World War II Nazi Germany, the voice might be less soulful, not as much yearning, more academic, explanatory, logically persuasive and reflective in a "this is what happened and why" tone of voice. That's fine too.

Yet this is the false dichotomy that as writing instructors we occasionally buy into: the academic/other writing false contrast, with the latter understood as weaker, reminding us of Derrida's claim that in such dichotomies, the latter is always seen as the weaker, subservient handmaiden. Save the creative personal writing for spring, love, or bread.

Imagine That

The harried, underpaid, and overwhelmed second language writing teacher may reflect briefly on the issues at hand, and then ask "So What?" or "What does this mean for my writing classroom?" To answer this question, one must call on patience and imagination.

Cultivating an awareness of students' voices in writing may seem fairly far down the list of front-line, day-to-day composition concerns. After all, getting second language students to compose anything besides hastily written and

minimally thought out musings is often difficult. When the task turns to writing a standard five paragraph academic essay, as it did last summer at a college where I was teaching, the complexity of finding a voice in writing for second language students becomes all too obvious. Despite specific and careful preparation and instruction, some students could not find their academic voice, a few students borrowing or hiring the voice of another.

It could be easily argued that a second language teacher's classroom time might be better spent coaxing grammatically acceptable sentences into fruition, or working on matters of structure, organization, and other academically and socially accepted concepts of 'good' writing. Voice, if it is present at all, may be furthest from the mind for both writer and teacher. Many times, it is thought of as an expensive option, rather like adding a CD player to your car. Teaching and encouraging voice is a luxury some teachers do not consider. Yet I would like to suggest that we, as teachers and readers and writers, need to address the idea of multiple voices in writing. This ambiguous notion is at the heart of what makes discourse work. Taking time to nurture voice is important if we are to take seriously the notion of individual and collective social identities in the classroom. We sometimes hear writing as music, a symphony of discourse and thought. Or (more modestly) a single wavering a cappella voice, unsteady and unsure, searching for a note or a melody with which to support an idea.

One danger here, and I believe a danger any time a paradigm shift occurs, is that teachers and students will mistake voice as the sole thing of beauty in a text read or written. That is, they may focus on voice to the exclusion of all other matters; pedagogical programs will be established, and voice will be the thing until, well, the next fad emerges. Another danger is the fear of what our students

might say. If we encourage free expression of student voices, we risk hearing the shrill sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic voices of both men and women. Male voices, in particular, may be met with bewilderment and hostility. Tobin (1996) has remarked that in reading the narrative of adolescent males, "I listened for error rather than for potential" (p. 159) and suggests "that many composition teachers--*male as well as female*--have largely negative reactions and particular resistances to the conventional male narrative" (p. 161). We are just now realizing that male identity and development needs to be directly nurtured. What is clear is that the male cultural stereotypes, the strong silent heroes, are no longer enough to address the experience of being male. In order to gain access to that site of maddening male inarticulateness, male writers in our classrooms need to be listened to, attended to, given an outlet of expression that takes them beyond the stereotypes of sports, cars, and guns. Masculine energy is one of movement forward, competition, aggression, ejaculation, deep feeling unnamed. Real (1997) refers to the notion that "men are not supposed to be vulnerable. Pain is something we are to rise above" (p. 22). For some men, deep, personal, voiceful writing carries with it the risk of exposing something private and enclosed, not meant for others to read, which may startle some students.

We must seek a space between text and reader where voices echo. But what is this space we speak of? It is a hard space. It is a soft space. Always a dichotomy. Perhaps a false dichotomy. An opposition. Again an unreal opposition. Good/Bad. Pass/Fail. Live/Die. If you strain to hear the voices, they fade. You hear nothing. I think of that puzzling Zen koan of the tree in the forest: If no one is there to hear it fall, does it still make a sound? Me, coming from New Brunswick, I could imagine lots of trees falling, the one sure way to avoid injury

being to get the hell out of the way. My father had taught me how to cut a tree. Cut a wedge and be sure to stand on the other side. You can yell "Timber!" to add drama to the moment. Hopefully those within range will hear. Surely the animals, or the vegetation, hear something. The rustling of the trees. A thump. It may disappoint you to learn that trees in forests rarely thump. There's too much around for them to do that. Sometimes they don't even fall down, but just slump quietly, pathetically, the trunk cut, but the tree unwilling to fall. Occasionally a tree will just remain there, a half-amputated limb dangling by serrated flesh. Many winters later you will encounter that tree again, perhaps as you trudge out of breath through three feet of snow, and be startled by this gigantic wizened pole sugared with snow.

The Real Me

I made it through. I survived, more or less intact, yet was changed by the experience. The weeks and months roll by, every day hoping to have put this sickness, this disease, behind me for good. And I know I will. That said, I must admit to a continuing morbid curiosity regarding the experience of depression. I cannot fully rely on myself, my moods, and my energy quite yet. Like a satellite mistakenly bumped out of orbit and sent tumbling back to earth, I occasionally re-enter the fiery darkness of depression. It is those days that the disease seems most comical and amusing to me; nothing is wrong, yet I am not right within. I do what I do: walk, cook, eat, talk, work, exercise, reflect, think, write. Yet for that day or two the world is black, featureless, heavily weighted, the din too loud, the tears too much. It is like an electrical short circuit, a power outage, a "brown out" of the brain. During those times, I try to get away, distract myself,

maybe call someone up just to talk. The human voice, even in idle chatter, can be a soothing balm for the soul.

I am still taking antidepressants, automatically and faithfully, out of hope that these compounds will help heal that which is chemically awry in my brain. Someday I hope I won't have to take these, but for now I welcome this synthetic crutch. I do fear what might happen if they stopped working, as for unknown reasons antidepressants do from time to time, or what might happen if, despite them, my brain stubbornly decides to go on an extended holiday. I must believe they will work, and continue to do the other things in life that help. I feel I am wise to refrain from dwelling on this disease, yet, like many people who have experienced depression, it is hard to put it entirely out of my mind. Wurtzel (1994) reflecting on her own adventures with depression, admits:

On Prozac, I often walk around so conscious of how not-terrible I feel that I am petrified that I'm going to lose this new equilibrium. I spend so much time worrying about staying happy that I threaten to become unhappy all over again. Any time I am bothered about anything, whether it's a line that's too long at the bank or a man who doesn't return my love, I have to remind myself that these emotional experiences (petty annoyance in the former instance, heartbreak in the latter) are reasonable and discrete unto themselves...I will never not be on guard for depression, but the constancy, the obsessive and totalizing effect of that disease, the sense that life is something happening to other people I am watching through an opaque cloud, is gone.

(p. 292-293)

Putting depression out of my mind, placing it behind me, is a challenge. Depression, in its many guises, is so inextricably bound up with the self that getting rid of it would only be possible if I could throw out my brain and get a

new one. This would be unacceptable as I am fond of my mind and accustomed to its idiosyncrasies. At any rate, perhaps it's best not to look back but look ahead; the dark anxiety might be gaining. I find myself at a nearby park or, more frequently, taking strolls on the beach, just sitting and reading on the sand. Weil (1997) notes that doing so "slows us down, takes us out of our routines, and reminds us that we live on a remarkable planet that we share with many other forms of life" (p. 78). And although it is still hard to imagine a future unfurling bravely and confidently before me, I still get up everyday with the rest of the world and proceed as if there is one.

In a recent re-issue of the classic book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Pirzig (1999) speaks of the ancient Greeks, and their notion that the future comes up behind us, surprising us: "They saw the future as something that came upon them from behind their backs," he writes, "with the past receding away before their eyes" (p. 413). Perhaps that's one of the secrets of living. Face the past, and the future will be behind you all the way.

Hearing Voices

The future of voice in writing is another matter, for it is the ambiguous nature of the enterprise of voice that will continue to challenge. When I speak of the future, I am, of course, speaking of the past as well. Western philosophical tradition has seconded writing to speech, yet paradoxically it is the voice of writing that often moves us when we read. How could this be? Perhaps speech and writing are not enemies, not as far apart as Plato has lead us to believe.

Speech is the salient ephemeral vocal emission of the heart and mind, yet it is gone in a moment's notice. Throughout history we realize that both speech

and writing have the potential to deceive, that neither is particularly or inherently truthful. Like the Sophists that Socrates exposed in ancient Greece, the great leaders and orators of our time continue to say one thing and do another, to deny, spin, or interpret events and actions as they wish us to perceive them. We halfways expect lies and deception, and have become jaded and exasperated as a consequence. Speech informs writing which informs speech. Writing enables us to critically think and consider beyond these ephemeral and emotional voices.

The issue of voices in writing is not a subject that is simple and without many layers of complexity. Perhaps we believe as the ancients did, that speech really is superior to writing, and as such we cannot fathom the paradoxical nature of voice in writing. In our increasingly technological culture, a phenomenon such as voice that does not easily lend itself to quantification and codification tends to be supplanted by that which does. We are urged to be 'clear' in our writing, but that too is an enduring metaphor worth examining (Vipond, 1993). Many teachers seem to have their own sense of voice in reading and writing, but it remains difficult to impart this "felt" sense to first and second language learners.

Looking back on my own growth as a reader and writer, I believe that having access to rich texts is one of the keys in developing the vocally aware reader and writer. After all, it was the *voices* in the texts I read that moved me to write in the first place, although there is no explicit causal sequence implied here. Raising children in an environment rich in writerly and readerly texts can help bring meaning to their life and this world we inhabit. It can nurture their multiple voices.

Writing instruction that concentrates on technique, structure, and strategy without regard for the notion of voices is bound to fall short. Students in second language classrooms are frequently required to produce certain genres of discourse before they have an opportunity to read and examine appropriate examples. Living in what de Castell (1996) has described as a post-literate culture, where the nature of knowledge has been transformed by the process of "computerization of information" (p. 27), we should not be surprised that "new technologies and practices have largely superseded writing and the written word" (p. 27). That is to say, the emergence of the cult of information has both muted student voices in the classroom and removed more traditional means of learning and discovering voice in writing and in life--namely, the book or text, be it narrative, expository, or poetic. We are without a doubt a most informed, connected, and overwhelmed culture, but also a culture that is struggling with ways to articulate new definitions of literacy, morality, and respect for diversity. It would be unrealistic to imagine that voices on its own is the key to literacy education, for if we have learned anything in educational studies, it is that the search for the key is a treacherous and pointless endeavor. There are a multitude of ways of learning, knowing, and being, just as there are a multitude of voices that we will encounter in and out of the educational world. I believe we must take steps to hear and appreciate this multiplicity of voices, to be open to the development of different perspectives while at the same time being in touch with our own desires and voices. One voice does not supplant or cancel another out; rather, it joins together to make something greater than its parts. At the same time, the very concept of voice with which I have been struggling in these hundred or so pages must itself come under deep suspicion, insofar as voice is

close to speech, and speech as we have seen has been part of the privileged status, the metaphysical core, the origin of our world, set forth with the biblical words "In the beginning was the Word."

As a final Derridian note, I expect there is really no finality in texts, no ending, such as when we reach the final page of a text and are informed as to the origin of the type. Like the voices I heard on the radio as a child, texts fade in and out, we catch one and we lose another. Some texts outlive their authors, to speak and be spoken to in contexts the writer could not have imagined, to be rethought and reread in ways never dreamt. Other texts remain unclaimed, anonymous, orphans in the discourse of life.

As for the author, whose death has been very much ballyhooed in recent years (see Barthes, for example), Foucault (1984) speaks beyond this event, suggesting that "we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (p. 105). Once we locate this space, what will be discovered? I believe that this empty space, like an empty auditorium, is also the space where voices echo. Once we have moved beyond the hero worship of writers, the "system of valorization" (p. 101) of which Foucault speaks, we enter the space of voices. It is nice to know who is writing, that there is in fact someone like ourselves employing shimmering signifiers. Hopefully, somewhere along the line, other readers will take it upon themselves to offer their own texts into this space, the world of discourse. To write for themselves. To *write* themselves. Derrida proposes that not only do we write, but we are also written. Without the writer and the reader there can be no text, no discourse. At the moment of creation, the text exists on its own, a product of, but

apart from, the creator, who is also bathed in the stream of texts that have come before and have yet to be written. The text, subject to shifting contexts, cultures, and the evolving reader, speaks a multitude of voices. Authors live and die, famous, anonymous, or unknown, but texts and voices live on, moving with the tide of discourse and time.

The very notion of voice and how it relates to the processes of reading and writing, surely two of the most common activities of a literate and literary culture, does alas come under suspicion. We are mesmerized by voices, which may explain the continuing numbing popularity of talk shows. The voices of these hosts and guests enter our brain, hijacking our thoughts. We stop to listen to the spectacle for the same reason people slow down at car crashes: to see and hear the carnage. Freedom of speech and freedom of voice; they are not the same. Are we encouraging our students to have freedom of voice? We need to ponder whether attention to their voices is practical and appropriate; if it is, we ought to encourage these writers, providing a generous space where they can speak and write and be heard. We must open ourselves to really listen for these multiple voices in our midst.

For teachers of writing, teaching about voice is challenging. We cannot easily explain what we mean by voice, but we know when it is not present. Is it the human voice we need to hear in writing? Does it really matter whether voice is present in writing? It seems clear that not all writing has a clear voice. The people who wrote the instruction manual for my Samsung microwave probably weren't thinking about voice. On the other hand, the owner's manual for my car seems more *voiceful*, as if the people at Honda expected the driver to curl up with some mint tea and carefully peruse each section. Voiceful writing (and the

metaphor of voice) drew me into the world of writing, and has helped make living a life worthwhile.

Clearly, there are many issues surrounding writing, not just voice. Some researchers have questioned the value of focusing on voice. Gilbert (1991) writes that "the concept of voice as the power that makes a text intelligible and readable is both an unhelpful and misleading explanation of how meaning is produced in text" (p. 206). Gilbert and others have suggested that approaching language as a "social semiotic system" (p. 207) might more usefully demonstrate and unpack different genres of writing. At the same time, I believe that the notion of voices in writing will continue to be useful as we witness the blurring of genre, and the way different voices can work in a single text. Different approaches, alternate theories, new paradigms, and open debate about the nature and teaching of writing can only lead to benefits for teachers and students. The more eclectic and eccentric our theories of writing become, the better we will be able to capture the inherent complexity of the task, and the more we will be able to guide and assist our students with their writing. With this in mind, voice is one notion that must be included if we are to guide our students into the writing world.

The voices I hear remind me that my own voices and others are important and matter, and that it is crucial to develop and nurture our own voices when we write. Exactly how teachers will share and encourage this respect and love for voice in the first and second language classroom will rest on the degree of willingness teachers and students have towards exploring *personal writing*, and the manner in which notions of what is acceptable in academic and scholastic writing are negotiated. In some cases, academic writing, for journals as well as for papers presented at conferences and seminars, has managed to merge

characteristics of both traditions into a hybrid form: the personal research reflection, of which this thesis is an example. Such personally oriented research is becoming more commonplace, taking its place alongside more traditional approaches. I believe there is room for many different modes of inquiry and discourse in the academy; it is a matter of being aware of the presence of voice, to write voicefully.

The voices of my past will likely always be with me, in some form or another, faint sounds speaking from an uncertain distance: Kevin's hip plea that all he wanted to do was be in the army; Charles' deep, fleshy, often exasperated voice, or that of Rev. Eddie Karnes, urging me to get out of Bangkok before it was too late, and the chorus of teachers and professors and therapists who have taught and encouraged me over the last twenty years. These voices join together with those I encounter in the here and now, the space of life occurring, this space not despised for its complexity, but celebrated for its diversity and rich difficulty. In the journey of life different things reach different people, and voices reach me. Ever since I can remember, the voices in my life have been cherished sounds, even those cacophonous ones, preserved and alive in my memory. For me, forever and ever, it will always be a world of voices.

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