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Coyote in the Mountains

MFA in a Box

A *Why* to Write Book

John Rember

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First Dream of Things Edition

For Julie,
who wears many hats in our marriage,
some of them gold.

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Introduction

MFA IN A BOX is not a How to Write Book. It's a *Why* to Write Book.

If you want a How to Write Book, two good ones are William Zinssner's *On Writing Well* and Richard Hugo's *The Triggering Town.* In my decades of teaching writing, I've consistently assigned those two books to my students. Another book I always assign is Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference,* because new writers make apostrophe mistakes. Editors view apostrophe mistakes the way they might view a worm dropping out of the nose of a corpse, and as far as they're concerned, the corpse belongs to the writer whose flawed manuscript they're reading.

This book is full of references to other writers and their works, and you may recognize the worm and the nose above as an allusion to *Gilgamesh,* one of the oldest stories in the world. It's a story about death and grief, and I consider death and grief so important to writers that I've devoted a chapter of this book to a meditation on *Gilgamesh* as a twenty-first century story.

If you read every work that I allude to in these pages, you'll have the foundation for a decent, if quirky, education in the humanities. You'll also be familiar with the struggles of brilliant minds to make meaning in a universe that can seem devoid of

meaning. If you're struggling to make meaning out of your own experience, this book will help.

ALL OF THE CHAPTERS in this book had their origins in problems that either stopped my writing cold or that would have stopped it if I'd thought about them.

Here's an example: at one point in my teaching career I told my writing students, "You can't avoid nihilism, you have to go through it."

My glib words sounded good to me and may have sounded good to my students, but they wouldn't have sounded good to people who had studied Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, philosophers who had actually grappled with the problem. The old Schopenhauer joke goes that Socrates said the unexamined life is not worth living, and two thousand years later Schopenhauer discovered that the examined life isn't worth living either.

Actually, the phrase *Schopenhauer joke* is a joke.

So one of my chapters discusses what I meant by "going through nihilism," and the soul-destroying things that can happen to you if you try. As far as I know, none of my students actually did try to go through nihilism, which is a good thing.

These days, my less-than-glib caution to writers is that almost no one who dives into a belief in nothing makes it through to believing in something. Furthermore, if you write the truth about the world we live in, you're going to be facing more voids than just the blank screen in front of you. Now I tell my students, "Try not to write out of a totally naïve place. But don't write out of a place where you're so street smart that you don't believe in anything, because you'll quit writing or you'll kill yourself."

Too dark? Nothing in this book will be as dark as that place in the middle of a story where you're convinced that you're writing a bridge to nowhere, and that the idea of writing as an identity and occupation was a bad one in the first place.

Every writer faces that dark place, and a lot of them succumb to it. A good many people who invest years of their lives and tens of thousands of dollars in an MFA degree never write again, simply because they cannot follow a story into its own depths, or they fear that if they do, they'll never get back to daylight.

A big part of this Why to Write Book involves grappling with and defeating the terrors and discouragements that come when you have writing skills but can't project yourself or your work into the future. This book will give you solace in those dark nights of the soul, and it will give evidence that the sun eventually breaks the darkest horizon.

THIS BOOK tries to show and not tell. Whatever that means.

Somewhere far away and long ago, probably in the ancient city of Uruk, when Gilgamesh was its king, the first fiction workshop was held. When the workshop's first story was written on slabs of clay and passed around the group, fourteen of the fifteen people who read it inscribed the Uruk equivalent of Show Don't Tell in its margins.

If everyone agreed on the meaning of Show Don't Tell, there would be no reason for MFA programs. The great novels that people hold in their hearts would translate directly to the page, and then fly back off the page into the hearts of happy readers everywhere. That doesn't happen. One problem is that Show Don't Tell doesn't refer to what happens on the page. It refers to

what happens in your reader's head when he or she looks at the page.

I don't claim that you'll know the ultimate meaning of Show Don't Tell by my last chapter, but you'll know more about what it means than you know now.

Parts of this book are a writer's memoir, parts of it are tales from my misspent youth, and parts of it are knowledge that I received from generous teachers. You will be relieved to know that I don't pretend that your path to writing will be the same as my path to writing.

Almost everything in this book will require that you translate it into your own terms. After all, I'm an old white guy writing in the middle of Idaho. Chances are that you're not one of those. So read with an eye toward changing my metaphors and images into equivalent metaphors and images from your own life. Above all, let my stories spark your own.

I HOPE that when you finish this book you'll be able to balance the deep despair of writing with the deeper joy of writing. I hope you'll find the courage to put truth into words. I hope you'll find reasons for being kind and intelligent in the presence of your readers and characters. I hope you'll understand that writing is a life-and-death endeavor, but nothing about a life-and-death endeavor keeps it from being laugh-out-loud funny.

I hope you'll finish this book with more reasons to write than not to write.

Finally, this book is in no way intended to replace a real MFA. If it were, I'd be charging a lot more for it. But if you have decided to become a serious and literary writer, it will give you

glimpses of the terrain ahead, and an idea of the talent and will and good luck that you'll need to negotiate that terrain, and even some routes around the rough spots.

If you are an MFA student, this book will help you get more for your tuition money.

Regardless of who you are, it will give you reason to sit in that chair and to face the screen that has nothing on it. Yet.

John Rember
Sawtooth Valley, Idaho

1
Writing Violence

Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.
—Philip K. Dick

IT'S SIX HUNDRED MILES from my home in central Idaho to Forest Grove, Oregon. I've traveled those miles many times going to and from the June residencies of the Pacific University Low-Residency Master of Fine Arts in Writing program.

Six hundred miles means ten hours in the car, and you'd think that would be time enough to come up with the answers to every question about writing. But it doesn't work that way. Instead, you come up with more questions.

For example, as I've driven by the fences and concrete walls of the Oregon State Prison in Pendleton, I've wondered about the author and murderer Jack Henry Abbott, who wrote the prison memoir *In The Belly of the Beast*.

Abbott's memoir attracted the attention of the novelist Norman Mailer, who orchestrated a successful effort to have Abbott paroled in 1981.

Abbott's parole was less successful. Six weeks into it, he

stabbed a waiter to death for denying him access to a restroom. The stabbing prompted an ironic *mea culpa* from Norman Mailer, who said, in effect, that writers are shocked—shocked!—when the violence of their imaginations turns out to have a real world counterpart.

Abbott went back to prison for fifteen to life. It turned out to be life. He committed suicide in prison in 2002 after his second book didn't sell anywhere near as well as his first. He used a shoelace and a bedsheet to hang himself, which indicates determination, a certain amount of ingenuity, and an unwillingness to write a third book. He left a note, which may or may not have explored any of these things.

Norman Mailer was accused of romanticizing Jack Henry Abbott by portraying him as a talented artist caught up in the gears of an inhuman system.

In another side note to this story, Jack Henry Abbott's sanity wasn't questioned by the authorities until he killed himself. Then they called him crazy, indicating that suicide is the ultimate insanity defense.

A RELATIVELY BENIGN QUESTION that you ask when you drive through Pendleton at sixty-five miles per hour: how does someone like Jack Henry Abbott take the mindless violence of his life and make meaningful narrative out of it? A less benign question: what violence exists in the rest of us who are trying to write narrative, even if we've never been convicted of anything more serious than a parking violation? Less benign yet: how many stories are there behind the walls of the Pendleton prison, stories that will never get told because the people

inside are so damaged that they cannot make meaning at all?

These questions imply that an ability to make meaning is good, the criminal mind of Jack Henry Abbott notwithstanding. When I juxtapose stories and meaning, I'm implying that stories are good, and that if we're not too damaged, we can form a narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end, and we can tell it to other people, and their worlds will contain more meaning—if they're not too damaged to catch it.

But one more question, a question from the deep and the dark: what if most people, who aren't violent criminals, who live ordinary lives in a civilized culture, who pay their bills and go to their jobs and contribute to United Way—what if the mundane is a form of violence that has damaged these people so much that they can no longer tell stories?

If Jack Henry Abbott escaped nothing else, he escaped the mundane. And he was able to articulate the damage done to him over a lifetime of incarceration. In his letters to Norman Mailer, written at age thirty-seven, he noted that since the age of twelve, he had been free only nine and a half months. More than a decade of his imprisonment had been served in solitary confinement. But because his letters demonstrated that Abbott was sane and perceptive—that he could make sense after seeing and doing and having done to him what would render most of us mad—Mailer argued for his release.

Even after he had killed somebody for denying him the restroom, Abbott had his defenders. At the murder trial, where actor Susan Sarandon and writer Jerzy Kosinski appeared as character witnesses, Abbott told his victim's grieving widow that her "husband's life wasn't worth a dime." After Abbott's conviction, the

widow said she was glad that he wouldn't be able to kill again.

Abbott's capacity for violence was his first defense against his world, but it wasn't his only defense. If you read *In the Belly of the Beast*, you understand that a culture that is supposed to protect human beings destroys some of them. Some people get caught in the gears, which is bad, but as they do they develop a sense of irony, which is good. Abbott wouldn't have become a writer without his sense of irony.

I don't think you can be sane without irony. I don't believe you can make meaning without irony. I don't think you can combat the violence of the mundane without irony. Without irony, your characters will be mute victims of circumstance, and over time, you'll be a mute victim of circumstance, too, not a writer at all.

Of course, in the long run, we're all mute victims of circumstance.

A PARTIAL LIST of the ironies attendant to the story of Jack Henry Abbott:

- In spite of the efforts of the prison authorities, Abbott did kill again.
- Susan Sarandon, who seems to be an otherwise benign person—somebody you'd like to hang out with, especially if you play baseball—named her son Jack Henry Robbins after Jack Henry Abbott.
- Jerzy Kosinski, whose novels contain a level of psychological and physical violence beyond the tolerance of a lot of readers, committed suicide in 1991 with barbiturates. His suicide note said he was putting himself to sleep for longer than usual. It was shorter and probably less articulate than the note Abbott left, which the prison

authorities still refuse to release. They're waiting for a call from their agent.

- Abbott's victim, a young man named Richard Adan, was an aspiring writer who had just had a play accepted for production.
- Norman Mailer knew more about non-fictional violence than he let on. He had stabbed his wife at a party in 1960, almost killing her. Mailer died in 2007, not a suicide, even though he had received the *Literary Review*'s Bad Sex in Fiction Award for his last book, *The Castle in the Forest.*
- Abbott's second book, *My Return,* expressed little remorse for any of his crimes and was used as justification to deny him parole at a 2001 hearing. So be careful what you put in your memoirs.
- Finally, if I'm correct to assume that telling stories is something that human beings will do if they're not too damaged, then there are lots of people out there way more damaged than Jack Henry Abbott, Jerzy Kosinski, and Norman Mailer.

SO YOU FIND YOURSELF on I-84 in Pendleton, Oregon, on your way to an MFA residency and you get caught up in the story of Jack Henry Abbott. You also gain some insight into the problem of staying in the Now if you're a writer. The Now is a prison in Pendleton where thousands of lives have been freeze-framed behind razor wire. The Now is the population of prisoner's spouses and children in Pendleton's cheap apartments. It's the abandoned buildings downtown and the recession-emptied

campus of Blue Mountain Community College. It's the sputtering hum of your car in the 105-degree heat, the whine of its air-conditioner, the flashing lights of the Umatilla Tribe's Wildhorse Resort and Casino, and the steep grade of Cabbage Hill outside of town, where now and then a pickup driver with a trailer full of cattle won't downshift soon enough, and his brakes fail.

The Now is a violent place, and if you use pretty philosophical questions to insulate yourself from its violence, you're not going to see the Now at all. The Now will simply be a place you travel through while remembering the ironies surrounding a good writer who was a bad person and checking your memory once you get to a motel with Wi-Fi.

But before you start assuming that the Now is the fifteen minutes on either side of what your watch is telling you, consider this: if you are a writer, the most important characteristic of the Now is that it contains the past. Start telling a story and if you're not careful, you'll find yourself writing backstory. Start writing backstory and you'll find that you're not going back far enough. If you're a writer of *place*, you find the Now expanding to include the Pleistocene and beyond, because your characters seldom transcend the landscape. The Now is a tar pit at La Brea, and it's always giving up the perfectly preserved bones of what has fallen into it.

Jack Henry Abbott's isn't the only ghostly voice you hear on the trip from Sawtooth Valley to Forest Grove. Let's go back to central Idaho and start over, and see where we took a turn toward the dark, to get so ironic and so violent so soon.

WE LEAVE HOME in a June snowstorm. Snowstorms happen in Sawtooth Valley even when it's 105 in the desert west of Pendleton. Clouds fold over the Sawtooth Mountains, and streamers of snow come trailing down the canyons. Rocks roll down the road-cuts onto the highway, and deer and elk begin to move through the mists.

I drive slowly during June snowstorms, because sometimes people in giant SUVs will move into your lane to avoid rocks or cow elk or fawns, even when they see you coming.

Thirty-five miles from Stanley, where the road meets the South Fork of the Payette, the river that comes out of the north end of the Sawtooths, the past becomes the present. I am hit with a memory from the summer of 1965: my family is constructing new trail along the headwaters of that river, in a remote part of the Sawtooth Wilderness, twenty-four miles from the nearest road.

I'm fourteen. I'm living in a tent and most days I'm looking at the ass end of a harnessed workhorse, guiding a one-sided plow, peeling virgin hillside out and down to make a path for hikers and horsemen. And yet I'm not far from civilization. B-52 bombers fly over, dropping glittering chaff that makes spindrifts in the sunlight and hangs in the trees like tinsel.

That's forty-five years ago, is what I'm thinking as I wake from memory, twenty miles later. We're near the town of Lowman, once a mining and timber town, now a retirement community.

Not everything has changed. Some of the B-52s that dropped aluminum chaff on us are still flying. But some of their original pilots have died of old age. I've gotten a bit older myself.

In Lowman, we drive by fenced-off mounds decorated with radioactive warning signs. Underneath them lie great piles of

uranium tailings. Before the topsoil was brought in and the fences were put up, people in Lowman used the tailings for backfill around their foundations and as surfacing for their driveways, and I remind myself to invest in a Geiger counter if I ever decide to buy a house in Lowman.

Downriver, after fifteen miles of whitewater, we pass a dam site that the Army Corps of Engineers evaluated during the 1950s, when they examined every stream in the country for hydroelectric potential. Their excavations are visible on the other side of the river, tunnels just a few feet above the water, where they drilled deep into the rock to see if it would anchor a dam five hundred feet high and a quarter mile wide in case oil ever stopped flowing from the Middle East.

When we get to Boise we stop at Costco. In that giant warehouse, with its racks of goods stacked to the ceiling, I fall into another memory: I'm surrounded by piles of Civil Defense supplies stored in the Sun Valley bus garage during the winter of 1962. My father drives one of the Sun Valley ski buses, and some days I wait in the garage for him after school. Fifty-gallon drums of crackers and water are stacked against the outside walls. The water is supposed to be a shield against radioactive fallout. The crackers are supposed to be equally effective against postwar starvation.

I still find it comforting to go to Costco and buy a year's supply of anything.

But we've got an MFA residency to go to, so we limit our purchases to wine and gasoline and get back on Interstate 84, one of the segments of the Eisenhower National Defense Highway System. As Allied commander during World War II,

Eisenhower was impressed by how the Germans used their autobahns to move military supplies and personnel, and he wanted something similar for his own country.

Our autobahns are designed to allow for the quick evacuation of American cities prior to the detonation of nuclear bombs in their centers. Throughout the entire system, one mile in five is straight, so that it can be used as a continent-wide airstrip in times of war. The section we travel is much straighter than that, at least until we get to the Columbia Gorge.

But before that, we pass 40 miles south of the 586-square-mile Department of Energy Hanford Reservation, where 56 million gallons of radioactive waste are stored in 177 underground tanks, some of them leaking. It's also a storage area for at least 4.6 million pounds of spent nuclear fuel, material that has to be stored in deep pools to keep it from melting into a critical mass, burning down to ground water, and drifting over the Northwest as radioactive steam and smoke.

It's also the location of 120 square miles of contaminated aquifer, the result of 440 billion gallons of liquid radioactive waste pumped directly into Hanford wells. Twenty-five tons of plutonium are there, much of it lost in the pipes and waste pits of Hanford's industrial maze. It's in the soil, plants, and the river. Plutonium-laden silt will pour over the Columbia's Celilo Falls if the McNary, John Day, and The Dalles dams are ever breached and fast-running waters cut down through the layers of reservoir mud.

Hanford isn't visible from I-84, but a few miles later, we can see the bunkers of the Umatilla Chemical Depot, which contain a collection of poison gasses and their delivery systems of rockets, artillery shells, and aerial sprayers. From the autobahn, we

can see the earth-covered bunkers that contain all these things. There are a great many of them, lumps in the landscape stretching to the horizon. Inside them, enough poisons to kill all the mammals on the planet. They represent only 12 percent of the U.S. chemical-weapons stockpile and are due to be destroyed by incineration at a date that recedes into the future.

As we drive farther toward the ocean, I become aware of other, less obvious artifacts of war. Certainly the cities of Richland, Kennewick, and Pasco wouldn't exist without Hanford, and without the defense spending brought into Oregon by its congressional delegation, Portland would be a far smaller and less vital city.

We get tangled in traffic in Portland. I'm glad there isn't a nuclear evacuation going on, because it would make the traffic even worse.

Approaching Forest Grove, I conclude that if I'm going to write about the Now, I'm going to have to place my characters in a world that is a Cold War artifact. I'm going to have to consider that my characters are products of violence, even if they didn't spend their grade-school years ducking and covering under their desks or deciding which of their classmates they would go home with if their parents had been killed in a nuclear war. That shock of recognition that I experience when faced with the iconic skull scenes of the *Terminator* movies suggests that I rest on a substrate just as violent and criminal as the one on which the late Jack Henry Abbott rests.

IT'S DISTURBING to think that your world rests on violence. When I advise new writers, I encounter people who find it

difficult to resolve the conflict in their stories. Nothing much happens in many of the stories I read. If the conflict has to be resolved by violence, the writer often as not leaves the scene. No one is there to guide the good guys into contact with the bad guys, and they instinctively avoid each other. Sometimes the bad guys are on vacation. Sometimes they're good guys in disguise. The last page of many stories I see is a lot like all the other pages: scenes happen, characters engage in dialogue, but nobody's life—least of all the writer's—is transformed.

The bad guys, if they show up, are cartoonlike and easily defeated. They don't hurt anybody. Nobody loses anything they can't ever get back. Magical realism is used to make the world a safer place for children, which even the children find boring and untrue and lacking in wonder.

It's as though the writer is a big unsmiling cop waving motorists around a particularly bloody accident on the Interstate: "Nothing to see here, folks. Keep moving."

When a writer puts a lid on the Now and says that the universe will continue with business-as-usual, stories die.

And when stories die, writers die. Camus called it philosophical death, by which he meant that when you deliberately set aside your sense of irony and cease to struggle against the absurdity of having a god's mind in an animal's body, the animal wins. You become flesh animated by nothing but tropism. What gives our god's mind sustenance is our willingness to be Prometheus in the face of Zeus. We disobey, we rebel, we ignore pleasure and seek out pain, we give fire to people who use it to upset the order of the universe and we go to our inevitable punishment only regretting that we got caught.

Writers are the cops who, instead of waving us on when we pass the accident, strip off their uniforms and jump up and down in black vinyl lingerie and say, "Stop your car. You gotta see this. Arms and legs are lying all over the blacktop, and we found a head in a motorcycle helmet stuck in the crotch of a tree. I've never seen so much blood. Look at this shit! Holy Cow!"

You don't have to write about violence all the time. But you do have to write about the world, and the world is a conflicted place, and often enough those conflicts are resolved by violence. You have to adopt an imperative of consciousness, which at its most basic means you pull the lid off the truth rather than sit on it.

Woody Allen says half of life is just showing up. For a writer, the other half is paying attention. The writer's most important function is bearing witness to what is real—to what hasn't gone away, even though you've stopped believing in it.

For example, if your readers drive by the miles of earth-covered bunkers of the Umatilla Chemical Depot, they need to know that those bunkers are not potato cellars. Nor was the Umatilla Tribe building funeral mounds about the time Lewis and Clark passed through. Giant plutonium-mutated prairie dogs have not escaped from nearby Hanford. What they are is evidence that two great and inhuman bureaucracies—one Soviet and one Capitalist—built millions of chemical weapons and biological weapons and nuclear weapons over fifty years of the twentieth century, and by the end of that time they had become twins, even down to the details of their collapse.

You don't have to write about collapsing civilizations if you're a writer, but it might be wise to lay in a carton of pencils and a stack of legal pads in case your computer uses electricity.

Consciousness asks that we consider the damage that our collective past has done to our individual present. If you're a writer placing your characters in the Now, you should know that the Now contains corroding stockpiles of weapons that won't get into the wrong hands as long as two corrupt and decaying economies continue to function.

LET'S LOOK at two connections between a capacity for violence and literary gifts.

The first connection comes out of structural theory, and it's been explored by Roland Barthes in a work called *Camera Lucida* and by Susan Sontag in *On Photography,* and it concerns the reduction of a three dimensional world to two-dimensional light and shadow, and what that reduction does to viewer and viewed. Sontag says photography turns its viewers into voyeurs, and its subjects into whatever it is voyeurs look at.

Barthes takes photography further toward the rendering of the world and the people in it. He is interested in photographs that contain the seeds of their own destruction, usually an image that violates the larger background of the photo itself. A bit of a photograph will betray its whole, exposing the whole endeavor as a flattened fraud.

Fraud or not, Barthes implies photography can turn the world into an ersatz version of itself. Painting becomes manipulated photorealism. Sculpture becomes a photographic object. Writing becomes camera work. Plays become screenplays. Our lives become ghostly light and shadow on flat film, and we cannot tell if we're in the photo or looking at it.

As a ski patrolman at Sun Valley I would pick up injured

people on the slopes, put them in a toboggan, slide them at high speed down to a waiting ambulance at the base lodge, and then ride with them in the ambulance to the hospital. Until they were lifted on a gurney and wheeled into the emergency room, they would be quiet and attentive and able to stand their pain. But once in the emergency room, all hell would break loose. They were finally in a situation that they had seen on TV, and they knew how to act. The histrionics began.

My injured toboggan passengers finally had a frame and a focus and a self image for their experience, one supplied by hospital soap operas. They no longer had to pay attention to what was happening to them—they could take it from there on memory alone. But they had less of self and more of image in the ER than they had had in the toboggan.

Once photography was invented it became difficult for writers not to use its conventions. Writers capture their characters. Writers frame scenes. Writers visualize narrative characters as cameras, and writers become adept at looking at the world through authorial lenses and filters. In my description of the journey between central Idaho and coastal Oregon, I'm using a filter that allows me to see the world as an artifact of the Cold War. That filter is a technical device. It's also a violation of creation itself, and it's probably a violation of the delighted child I once was, the child who first saw the world as green, whole, and nurturing.

God knows what violence Jack Henry Abbott had to do to his nine-year-old self just to get the first paragraph of his autobiography to the page.

Why do readers put up with this sort of thing? All this confusion between subject and object means that, at least for

the moment of reading, readers are coerced into viewing their own lives through a viewfinder. Their world is framed, cropped, altered, distorted, and often enough betrayed by the writer.

If you're the writer doing the coercing, it helps if you look at readers as you might look at sophisticated collectors of photography. Readers are aware of your flattening, your cropping, your betrayals of the world. They search out your deliberate distortions in the illusion you create, and examine your use of technical devices to accomplish your ends. Your readers call what results your *vision*.

In this way of looking at things, technical skills aren't just part of what a writer has. They are *all* a writer has. To the extent your skills shape your perception of the world, you need to get used to your work being a form of violence.

A second connection between violence and literary gifts is more practical. It has to do with getting up in the mornings and not being paralyzed by thoughts of nerve gas, CIA torture memos, or chemical weapons that the Russian mafia may or may not have sold to Al Qaeda, or nuclear weapons in North Korean fishing boats off the coast of Oregon.

Jack Henry Abbott and Norman Mailer and Jerzy Kosinski aside, writers like Cormac McCarthy and Flannery O'Connor and Joyce Carol Oates and Raymond Carver are able to function even when they're writing about the mundane and facing the violence that lies under it. Much of their violence starts out of ordinary situations—look at Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" as a good example of what can happen when friends get together for a little gin and reminiscence. They end up doing open-heart surgery without anesthesia.

O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" ends with a family on a road trip being murdered by a psychopath, and her gentle readers cheer when the grandmother gets it. McCarthy's *The Road* is a travelogue through savagery. Oates dedicates her story of a young girl's destruction, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been," to Bob Dylan—in lieu, I suppose, of dedicating it to the women who refused to see the violence against women in Dylan's poetry. There's a fair amount of misogyny in Joyce Carol Oates, and that's likely why she could see it in Bob Dylan.

What makes these writers functional is that when their stories lead them to violence, they embrace it. I don't imagine that Flannery O'Connor liked being conscious of her own murderous rage at her world and at the people who tried to be normal in it, but there it is, in black and white, in story after story. Maybe Cormac McCarthy likes writing about post-nuclear cannibalism, but his work seems less sadistic and more informative when I consider it from within the boundaries of the Umatilla Chemical Depot.

Every successful writer has the *courage* to confront the violence of the mundane.

Courage is the right word here. A page into writing a story, it's possible to think you'll never be able to face the violent implications of what you've put down. So you write a new first page. But it's better to stick with that first version and the ending it contains. Do it, and you'll rise from the blood and gore of a final draft and realize it's just a story. It can't hurt you anymore.

Successful writers know the difference between artifact and the world that spawns artifact. They can still glimpse the shadow of God's earth beneath the suburbs, and the flowing river beneath

the reservoirs, and the tribal footpaths beneath the blacktop, even while they're writing about suburbs and reservoirs and blacktop.

That's why you should avoid the real temptation, once you learn how to write scenes and dialogue, to let them become your reality. It's a step on the way to becoming a writer, but it isn't the final step. The final step is when you realize that writing is all artifice, and when you're good enough at artifice, you can pay attention to what lies beneath it.

One of the reasons I like the effect photography has had on writing is that it makes artifice explicit, and turns writers into artisans with an illusion to create.

Rules for Writers

Jack Henry Abbott's Ten Tips for Writing in a World That Won't Give You the Key to the Restroom

1. Know that what you put on the page isn't reality. What you put on the page is an artifact you hope your reader will accept as real for a while. But the story ends. The book is put down, and only your reader is able to say whether it was worth the time to read it.

2. Embrace the conventions of photography. Use frames, focus, lenses, shutter speeds, slow-motion, camera angles, strobe-lights, studio backdrops, negative space, and Photoshop. Take the time to compose images. Remember that some images are more interesting than others. A series of still shots can be put together in sequence to form narrative.

3. If a part of your story doesn't puncture or betray another part, you haven't finished the story.

4. What you think the world is or want the world to be can overwhelm your perceptions of the Now. Don't let it. Your perceptions are all you have that are truly your own. One crystal-clear vision is worth more to your reader than a dozen brilliant conclusions. Let your reader draw the brilliant conclusions from your vision. You'll both be happier.

5. It's okay to have a savage sense of irony. A sense of irony is an awareness of the difference between the way things are and the way things are supposed to be. The bigger the difference, the more savage the irony.

6. Don't let your reader have a more developed sense of irony than you do. Other ways to put this: don't take anything for granted that your reader doesn't take for granted. Don't be soppy stern about something your reader finds funny.

7. Don't be afraid to be a criminal at the keyboard. You wouldn't want to write if you didn't have criminal tendencies. Writing is rebellion, a defiance of the order of the universe. If Zeus's punishment for your defiance seems not to fit the crime, just remember that your liver will be as good as new tomorrow.

8. Much rewriting and editing is simply improving the signal-to-noise ratio of a story until a reader can stand to listen. Static comes in many forms, among them vagueness, wordiness, avoiding conflict, dialogue that doesn't carry the story, and self-indulgent authorial intrusion. You can never get rid of it completely, but over a number of drafts you can give your reader an idea of what distinct thing you are witnessing.

9. Read people whose ability to perceive hasn't been undermined by cultural Photoshop, who understand the violence of the mundane. Four books that help to perceive the violence of everyday life are:

   - R.D. Laing's *The Politics of Experience*
   - Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*
   - Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*
   - Peter Hoeg's *Borderliners*

   These books will help you with your Promethean Rebellion.

10. Remember that for 250,000 years of human history, unruly children were tossed out of the cave to play with the bears and wolves and lions. Writing will run into taboos that are deep in your genes. When two of your characters are about to say things to each other that will destroy their friendships and marriages and lives, you'll feel like you're about to be tossed out of the cave. But your readers will be just as scared. They'll be paying serious attention to the story you're telling. That's a good thing. That's the best part of telling a story.