

Run fast, stand still. This, the lesson from lizards. For all writers. Observe almost any survival creature, you see the same. Jump, run, freeze. In the ability to flick like an eyelash, crack like a whip, vanish like steam, here this instant, gone the next—life teems the earth. And when that life is not rushing to escape, it is playing statues to do the same. See the hummingbird, there, not there. As thought arises and blinks off, so this thing of summer vapor; the clearing of a cosmic throat, the fall of a leaf. And where it was—a whisper.

What can we writers learn from lizards, lift from birds? In quickness is truth. The faster you blurt, the more swiftly you write, the more honest you are. In hesitation is thought. In delay comes the effort for a style, instead of leaping upon truth which is the *only* style worth deadfalling or tiger-trapping.

In between the scurries and flights, what? Be a chameleon, ink-blend, chromosome change with the landscape. Be a pet rock, lie with the dust, rest in the rainwater in the filled barrel by the drainspout outside your grandparents' window long ago. Be dandelion wine in the ketchup bottle capped and placed with an

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

inked inscription: June morn, first day of Summer, 1923. Summer 1926, Fireworks Night. 1927: Last Day of Summer. LAST OF THE DANDELIONS, Oct. 1st.

And out of all this, wind up with your first success as a writer, at \$20 a story, in *Weird Tales*.

How *do* you commence to start to begin an almost new kind of writing, to terrify and scare?

You stumble into it, mostly. You don't know what you're doing, and suddenly, it's done. You don't set out to reform a certain kind of writing. It evolves out of your own life and night scares. Suddenly you look around and see that you have done something almost fresh.

The problem for any writer in any field is being circumscribed by what has gone before or what is being printed that very day in books and magazines.

I grew up reading and loving the traditional ghost stories of Dickens, Lovecraft, Poe, and later, Kuttner, Bloch, and Clark Ashton Smith. I tried to write stories heavily influenced by various of these writers, and succeeded in making quadruple-layered mudpies, all language and style, that would not float, and sank without a trace. I was too young to identify my problem, I was so busy imitating.

I almost blundered into my creative self in my last year in high school, when I wrote a kind of long remembrance of the deep ravine in my home town,

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

and my fear of it at night. But I had no story to go with the ravine, so my discovering the true source of my future writing was put off for some few years.

I wrote at least a thousand words a day every day from the age of twelve on. For years Poe was looking over one shoulder, while Wells, Burroughs, and just about every writer in *Astounding* and *Weird Tales* looked over the other.

I loved them, and they smothered me. I hadn't learned how to look away and in the process look not at myself but at what went on behind my face.

It was only when I began to discover the treats and tricks that came with word association that I began to find some true way through the minefields of imitation. I finally figured out that if you are going to step on a live mine, make it your own. Be blown up, as it were, by your *own* delights and despairs.

I began to put down brief notes and descriptions of loves and hates. All during my twentieth and twenty-first years, I circled around summer noons and October midnights, sensing that there somewhere in the bright and dark seasons must be something that was really me.

I finally found it one afternoon when I was twenty-two years old. I wrote the title "The Lake" on the first page of a story that finished itself two hours later. Two hours after that I was sitting at my typewriter out on a porch in the sun, with tears running off the tip of my nose, and the hair on my neck standing up.

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

Why the arousal of hair and the dripping nose?

I realized I had at last written a really fine story. The first, in ten years of writing. And not only was it a fine story, but it was some sort of hybrid, something verging on the new. Not a traditional ghost story at all, but a story about love, time, remembrance, and drowning.

I sent it off to Julie Schwartz, my pulp agent, who liked it, but said it was not a traditional tale and might be hard to sell. *Weird Tales* walked around it, touched it with a ten-foot pole, and finally decided, what the hey, to publish it, even though it didn't fit their magazine. But I must promise, next time, to write a good old-fashioned ghost story! I promised. They gave me twenty dollars, and everyone was happy.

Well, some of you know the rest. "The Lake" has been reprinted dozens of times in the forty-four years since. And it was the story that first got various editors of other magazines to sit up and notice the guy with the aroused hair and the wet nose.

Did I learn a hard, fast, or even an easy lesson from "The Lake"? I did not. I went back to writing the old-fashioned ghost story. For I was far too young to understand much about writing at all, and my discoveries went unnoticed by me for years. I was wandering all over the place and writing poorly much of the time.

During my early twenties, if my weird fiction was imitative, with an occasional surprise of a concept and

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

a further surprise in execution, my science-fiction writing was abysmal, and my detective fiction verged on the ludicrous. I was deeply under the influence of my loving friend, Leigh Brackett, whom I used to meet every Sunday at Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, California, there to read her superior Stark on Mars tales, or to envy and try to emulate her *Flynn's Detective* stories.

But along through those years I began to make lists of titles, to put down long lines of *nouns*. These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my better stuff to surface. I was feeling my way toward something honest, hidden under the trapdoor on the top of my skull.

The list ran something like this:

THE LAKE. THE NIGHT. THE CRICKETS.  
THE RAVINE. THE ATTIC. THE BASEMENT.  
THE TRAPDOOR. THE BABY. THE CROWD. THE  
NIGHT TRAIN. THE FOG HORN. THE  
SCYTHE. THE CARNIVAL. THE CAROUSEL.  
THE DWARF. THE MIRROR MAZE. THE  
SKELETON.

I was beginning to see a pattern in the list, in these words that I had simply flung forth on paper, trusting my subconscious to give bread, as it were, to the birds.

Glancing over the list, I discovered my old love and fright having to do with circuses and carnivals. I

#### ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

remembered, and then forgot, and then remembered again, how terrified I had been when my mother took me for my first ride on a merry-go-round. With the calliope screaming and the world spinning and the terrible horses leaping, I added my shrieks to the din. I did not go near the carousel again for years. When I really did, decades later, it rode me into the midst of *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

But long before that, I went on making the lists. THE MEADOW. THE TOY CHEST. THE MONSTER. TYRANNOSAURUS REX. THE TOWN CLOCK. THE OLD MAN. THE OLD WOMAN. THE TELEPHONE. THE SIDEWALKS. THE COFFIN. THE ELECTRIC CHAIR. THE MAGICIAN.

Out on the margin of these nouns, I blundered into a science-fiction story that was not a science-fiction story. My title was "R is for Rocket." The published title was "King of the Grey Spaces," the story of two boys, great friends, one elected to go off to the Space Academy, the other staying home. The tale was rejected by every science-fiction magazine because, after all, it was only a story about friendship being tested by circumstance, even though the circumstance was space travel. Mary Gnaedinger, at *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, took one look at my story and published it. But, again, I was too young to see that "R is for Rocket" would be the kind of story that

#### RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

would make me as a science-fiction writer, admired by some, and criticized by many who observed that I was no writer of science fiction, I was a "people" writer, and to hell with that!

I went on making lists, having to do not only with night, nightmares, darkness, and objects in attics, but the toys that men play with in space, and the ideas I found in detective magazines. Most of the detective material I published in my twenty-fourth year in *Detective Tales* and *Dime Detective* is not worth rereading. Here and there, I fell over my own shoelaces and did a nearly good job of remembering Mexico, which scared me, or downtown Los Angeles during the Pachucho riots. But it would take me the better part of forty years to assimilate the detective/mystery/suspense genre and make it work for me in my latest novel, *Death Is a Lonely Business*.

But back to my lists. And *why* go back to them? Where am I leading you? Well, if you are a writer, or would hope to be one, similar lists, dredged out of the lopsided side of your brain, might well help you discover *you*, even as I flopped around and finally found me.

I began to run through those lists, pick a noun, and then sit down to write a long prose-poem-essay on it.

Somewhere along about the middle of the page, or perhaps on the second page, the prose poem would

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

turn into a story. Which is to say that a character suddenly appeared and said, "That's *me*"; or, "That's an idea *I like!*" And the character would then finish the tale for me.

It began to be obvious that I was learning from my lists of nouns, and that I was further learning that my *characters* would do my work *for me*, if I let them alone, if I gave them their heads, which is to say, their fantasies, their frights.

I looked at my list, saw SKELETON, and remembered the first artworks of my childhood. I drew skeletons to scare my girl cousins. I was fascinated with those unclothed medical displays of skulls and ribs and pelvic sculptures. My favorite tune was "Tain't No Sin, To Take Off Your Skin, and Dance Around in Your Bones."

Remembering my early artwork and my favorite tune, I ambled into my doctor's office one day with a sore throat. I touched my Adam's apple, and the tendons on each side of my neck, and asked for his medical advice.

"Know what you're suffering from?" asked the doc.  
"What?"

"*Discovery* of the larynx!" he crowed. "Take some aspirin. Two dollars, please!"

*Discovery* of the larynx! My God, how *beautiful!* I trotted home, feeling my throat, and then my ribs, and then my medulla oblongata, and my kneecaps.

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

Holy Moses! Why not write a story about a man who is terrified to discover that under his skin, inside his flesh, *hidden*, is a symbol of all the Gothic horrors in history—a skeleton!

The story wrote itself in a few hours.

A perfectly obvious concept, yet no one else in the history of writing weird tales had ever scribbled it down. I fell into my typewriter with it and came up with a brand-new, absolutely original tale, which had been lurking under my skin since I first drew a skull and crossbones, aged six.

I began to gain steam. The ideas came faster now, and all of them from my lists. I prowled up in my grandparents' attics and down in their basements. I listened to the middle-of-the-night locomotives wailing across the northern Illinois landscape, and that was death, a funeral train, taking my loved ones away to some far graveyard. I remembered five o'clock in the morning, pre-dawn arrivals of Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and all the animals parading by before sunrise, heading for the empty meadows where the great tents would rise like incredible mushrooms. I remembered Mr. Electrico and his traveling electric chair. I remembered Blackstone the Magician dancing magical handkerchiefs and vanishing elephants on my hometown stage. I remembered my grandfather, my sister, and various aunts and cousins, in the coffins and gone forever in the tombyards where the butter-

#### ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

flies settled like flowers on the graves and where the flowers blew away like butterflies over the stones. I remembered my dog, lost for days, coming home late on a winter night with snow and mud and leaves in his pelt. And the stories began to burst, to explode from those memories, hidden in the nouns, lost in the lists.

My remembrance of my dog, and his winter pelt, became "The Emissary," the story of a boy, sick in bed, who sends his dog out to gather the seasons in his fur, and report back. And then, one night, the dog comes back from a journey to the graveyard, and brings "company" with him.

My listed title *THE OLD WOMAN* became two stories, one "There Was an Old Woman," about a lady who refused to die and demands her body back from the undertakers, defying Death, and a second tale, "Season of Disbelief," about some children who refuse to believe that a very old woman was ever young, was ever a girl, a child. The first story appeared in my first collection, *Dark Carnival*. The second became part of a further word-association test I gave myself, called *Dandelion Wine*.

We can surely see now, can't we, that it is the personal observation, the odd fancy, the strange conceit, that pays off. I was fascinated by old people. I tried to solve their mystery with my eyes and young mind but was continually astounded to realize that

#### RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

once upon a time they had been me, and some day up ahead I would be them. Absolutely impossible! Yet there the boys and girls were, locked in old bodies, a dreadful situation, a terrible trick, right before my gaze.

Pilfering from my list, again, I seized out the title *THE JAR*, the result of my being stunned at an encounter with a series of embryos on display in a carnival when I was twelve and again when I was fourteen. In those long-gone days of 1932 and 1934, we children knew nothing, of course, absolutely nothing about sex and procreation. So you can imagine how astounded I was when I prowled through a free carnival exhibit and saw all those fetuses of humans and cats and dogs, displayed in labeled jars. I was shocked by the look of the unborn dead, and the new mysteries of life they caused to rise up in my head later that night and all through the years. I never mentioned the jars and the formaldehyde fetuses to my parents. I knew I had stumbled on some truths which were better not discussed.

All of this surfaced, of course, when I wrote "The Jar," and the carnival and the fetal displays and all the old terrors poured out of my fingertips into my typewriter. The old mystery had finally found a resting place, in a story.

I found another title in my list, *THE CROWD*. And, typing furiously, I recalled a terrible collision

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

when I was fifteen and ran from a friend's house at the sound, to be confronted by a car that had hit an obstruction in the street and rocketed into a telephone pole. The car was split in half. Two people lay dead on the pavement, another woman died just as I reached her, her face ruined. Another man died a minute later. Still another died the next day.

I had never seen anything like it. I walked home, bumping into trees, in shock. It took me months to get over the horror of that scene.

Years later, with my list before me, I remembered a number of peculiar things about that night. The accident had occurred at an intersection surrounded on one side by empty factories and a deserted schoolyard, and on the opposite side, by a graveyard. I had come running from the nearest house, a hundred yards away. Yet, within moments, it seemed, a crowd had gathered. Where had they all come from? Later on in time, I could only imagine that some came, in some strange fashion, out of the empty factories, or even more strangely, out of the graveyard. After typing for only a few minutes, it came to me that, yes, this crowd was *always* the same crowd, that it gathered at *all* accidents. These were victims from accidents years ago, doomed to come back and haunt the scene of new accidents as they occurred.

Once I hit on this idea, the story finished itself in a single afternoon.

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

Meanwhile, the carnival artifacts were gathering closer, their great bones starting to thrust up through my skin. I was making longer and longer prose poem excursions about circuses that arrived long after midnight. During those years, in my early twenties, prowling a Mirror Maze on the old Venice Pier with my friends Leigh Brackett and Edmond Hamilton, Ed suddenly cried, "Let's get out of here, before Ray writes a story about a dwarf who pays his way in here every night so he can stand and make himself tall in the big stretch mirror!" "That's it!" I shouted, and ran home to write "The Dwarf." "That'll teach me to shoot off my mouth," said Ed, when he read the story the next week.

THE BABY on that list was, of course, me.

I remembered an old nightmare. It was about being born. I remembered lying in my crib, three days old, wailing with the knowledge of being thrust out into the world; the pressure, the cold, the shrieking into life. I remembered my mother's breast. I remembered the doctor, on the fourth day of my life, bending over me with a scalpel to perform circumcision. I remembered, I remembered.

I changed the title from THE BABY to "The Small Assassin." That story has been anthologized dozens of times. And I had lived the story, or part of it, from my first hour of life onward, and only truly remembered and nailed it down in my twenties.

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

Did I write stories based on every single noun in my pages and pages of lists?

Not all. But most. THE TRAP DOOR, listed way back in 1942 or '43, didn't surface until three years ago, as a story in *Omni*.

Another story about me and my dog took more than fifty years to surface. In "Bless Me, Father, for I Have Sinned," I went back in time to relive a beating I had given my dog when I was twelve, and for which I had never forgiven myself. I wrote the story to at last examine that cruel, sad boy and put his ghost, and the ghost of my much-loved dog, to rest forever. It was the same dog, incidentally, who brought "company" back from the graveyard in *The Emissary*.

During these years, Henry Kuttner, along with Leigh, was my teacher. He suggested authors—Katherine Anne Porter, John Collier, Eudora Welty—and books—*The Lost Weekend*, *One Man's Meat*, *Rain in the Doorway*—to be read and learned from. Along the way, he gave me a copy of *Winesburg, Ohio*, by Sherwood Anderson. Finishing the book, I said to myself, "Someday I would like to write a novel laid on the planet Mars, with somewhat similar people." I immediately jotted down a list of the sorts of folks I would want to plant on Mars, to see what would happen.

I forgot *Winesburg, Ohio* and my list. Over the years,

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

I wrote a series of stories about the Red Planet. One day, I looked up and the book was finished, the list complete, *The Martian Chronicles* on its way to publication.

So there you have it. In sum, a series of nouns, some with rare adjectives, which described a territory unknown, an undiscovered country, part of it Death, the rest Life. If I had not made up these prescriptions for Discovery I would never have become the jackdaw archaeologist or anthropologist that I am. That jackdaw who seeks bright objects, odd carapaces and misshapen femurs from the boneheaps of junk inside my head, where lay strewn the remnants of collisions with life as well as Buck Rogers, Tarzan, John Carter, Quasimodo, and all the other creatures who made me want to live forever.

In the words of the old Mikado song, I had a little list, save it was a long one, which led me into Dandelion Wine country and helped me move the Dandelion Wine country up to Mars, and ricocheted me back into dark wine territory as Mr. Dark's night train arrived long before dawn. But the first and most important pileup of nouns was the one filled with leaves whispering along the sidewalks at 3:00 A.M. and funerals wheeling by on empty railtracks, following, and crickets that suddenly, for no reason, shut up, so you could hear your own heart, and wish you couldn't.

## ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

Which leads us to a final revelation—

One of the nouns on my list in high school was **THE THING**, or, better yet, **THE THING AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS**.

When I was growing up in Waukegan, Illinois, there was only one bathroom; upstairs. You had to climb an unlit hall halfway before you could find and turn on a light. I tried to get my dad to keep the light on all night. But that was expensive stuff. The light stayed off.

Around two or three in the morning, I would have to go to the bathroom. I would lie in bed for half an hour or so, torn between the agonized need for relief, and what I knew was waiting for me in the dark hall leading up to the attic. At last, driven by pain, I would edge out of our dining room into that hall, thinking: run fast, leap up, turn on the light, but whatever you do, don't look up. If you look up before you get the light on, *It* will be there. The Thing. The terrible Thing waiting at the top of the stairs. So run, blind; don't look.

I ran, I leaped. But always, I couldn't help it, at the last moment, I blinked and stared into the awful darkness. And it was always there. And I screamed and fell back downstairs, waking my parents. My dad would groan and turn over in bed, wondering where this son of his had come from. My mother would get up, find me in a scrambled heap in the hall, and go up

## RUN FAST, STAND STILL . . .

to turn on the light. She would wait for me to climb up to the bathroom and come back down to have my tearstained face kissed and my terrified body tucked in bed.

The next night and the next night and the night after that, the same thing happened. Driven mad by my hysterics, Dad got out the old chamber pot and shoved it under my bed.

But I was never cured. The Thing remained there forever. Only moving West when I was thirteen got me away from that terror.

What have I done, recently, about that nightmare? Well . . .

Now, very late in time, The Thing is standing up at the top of the stairs, still waiting. From 1926 to now, in the spring of 1986, is a long waiting. But at last, gleaming my ever dependable list, I have typed the noun out on paper, added "The Stairs," and I have finally faced up to the dark climb and the Arctic coldness held in place for sixty years, waiting to be asked to come down through my frozen fingertips and into your bloodstream. The story, associated out of memory, was finished this week, even as I wrote this essay.

I leave you now at the bottom of your own stair, at half after midnight, with a pad, a pen, and a list to be made. Conjure the nouns, alert the secret self, taste the darkness. Your own Thing stands waiting 'way up

ZEN IN THE ART OF WRITING

there in the attic shadows. If you speak softly, and write any old word that wants to jump out of your nerves onto the page . . .

Your Thing at the top of your stairs in your own private night . . . may well come *down*.

1986

