

dream may come back alive, reconfigured. ("When I said I wanted to be a sprinter, what I really meant was that I wanted to be an *athlete*.")

Something like this can happen to writers too.

In my early thirties I saw myself as a Hemingwayesque realist. My material: the time I'd spent working in the oil fields in Asia. I wrote story after story out of that material, and everything I wrote was minimal and strict and efficient and lifeless and humor-free, even though, in real life, I reflexively turned to humor at any difficult or important or awkward or beautiful moment.

I had chosen what to write, but I couldn't seem to make it live.

One day, serving as a note taker on a conference call at the environmental engineering company where I was working, I started, out of boredom, writing these dark little Seussian poems. When I finished one, I'd draw a cartoon to go along with it. By the end of the call, I had around ten of these poem-and-cartoon pairs, and because they weren't my "real" writing, I almost threw them out as I left work that day. But something stopped me. I brought them home, dropped them on the table, went off to see the kids. And then I heard, from back at the table, the sound of genuine laughter, from my wife, as she read those stupid little poems.

This was, I realized with a start, the first time in years that anyone had reacted to my writing with pleasure. I had been getting, from friends and editors, all of those years, the type of reaction writers dread: my stories were "interesting," there was "a lot going in there, for sure," it was clear that I'd "really worked hard on them."

A switch got thrown in my head, and the next day I started writing a story in that new mode—allowing myself to be entertaining, setting aside my idea of what a "classic" story sounded like, and my usual assumption that only things that happened in the real world were allowed to happen in a story. In this new story, which was set in a futuristic theme park, I was using an awkward, slightly overdriven corporate voice that came naturally to me when I thought, "Go ahead, be funny." I wrote it a few lines at a time, not sure where it was going (what its arc was, or its theme, or its "message"), just paying attention to the line-by-line energy and especially to the humor, keeping an eye on my imaginary reader, to see if she was still with me—if she, like my wife, was

laughing from the other room and wanted more of the story rather than hoping it would mercifully end soon.

In this mode, I found, I had stronger opinions than when I was trying to be Hemingway. If something wasn't working, I knew what to do about it, immediately and instinctually, in the form of an impulse ("Oh, that might be cool"), whereas before I'd been rationally *deciding*, in stiff obeisance to what I thought a story should, or must, do.

This was a much freer mode—like trying to be funny at a party.

That story ended up becoming "The Wavemaker Falters," the first story I wrote for what would—seven years (!) later—become my first book, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*.

When I finished the story, I could see that it was the best thing I'd ever written. There was some essential "me-ness" in it—for better or worse, no one else could have written it. The things that were actually on my mind at that time, because they were in my life, were in the story: class issues, money shortages, work pressures, fear of failure, the odd-ball tonality of the American workplace, the failures of grace my state of overwork was causing me to commit every day. The story was oddly made, slightly embarrassing—it exposed my actual taste, which, it turned out, was kind of working-class and raunchy and attention-seeking. I held that story up against the stories I loved (some of which are in this book) and felt I'd let the form down.

So, this moment of supposed triumph (I'd "found my voice!") was also sad.

It was as if I'd sent the hunting dog that was my talent out across a meadow to fetch a magnificent pheasant and it had brought back, let's say, the lower half of a Barbie doll.

To put it another way: having gone about as high up Hemingway Mountain as I could go, having realized that even at my best I could only ever hope to be an acolyte up there, resolving never again to commit the sin of being imitative, I stumbled back down into the valley and came upon a little shit-hill labeled "Saunders Mountain."

"Hmm," I thought. "It's so *little*. And it's a *shit-hill*."

Then again, that was my name on it.

This is a big moment for any artist (this moment of combined triumph and disappointment), when we have to decide whether to accept a work of art that we have to admit we weren't in control of as we made

it and of which we're not entirely sure we approve. It is *less*, less than we wanted it to be, and yet it's *more*, too—it's small and a bit pathetic, judged against the work of the great masters, but there it is, all ours.

What we have to do at that point, I think, is go over, sheepishly but boldly, and stand on our shit-hill, and hope it will grow.

And—to belabor this already questionable metaphor—what will make that shit-hill grow is our commitment to it, the extent to which we say, “Well, yes, it is a shit-hill, but it's *my* shit-hill, so let me assume that if I continue to work in this mode that is mine, this hill will eventually stop being made of shit, and will grow, and from it, I will eventually be able to see (and encompass in my work) the whole world.”

Did Turgenev intend “The Singers” to serve as an apologia for his lack of craft? While he was writing it? After he had written it? I'm pretty sure he didn't “aim” to produce an apologia—didn't *start out* to do that. I doubt he realized what he'd done, and I don't know that he'd necessarily bless our assessment of it. But here's the important thing: I don't think it matters. He did it, and then he let it stand. Which is a form (the ultimate form, for an artist) of “meaning to do it” (of taking responsibility). The blessing an artist gives the final product (which he gives by sending it out into the world) is his way of saying that he approves of everything within it, even parts of it that may, in that moment, be hidden from him.

That is to say, final approval isn't given just by one's conscious mind.

My experience is that, late in the game, finishing a story, we're in such deep relation to it that we're making decisions we're not even aware we're making, for reasons too fine to articulate. And we're in too big of a hurry to articulate them anyway. We're operating in an intuitive zone, deciding quickly, without much deliberation.

We've been preparing a hall for a banquet all day, arranging furniture, hanging and rehangng decorations, working so fast and with such intensity that we wouldn't be able to explain the basis on which we've been working. It's late. The guests are coming soon. We've got to race home and get dressed. We pause in the doorway taking in the