

METAPHOR FLUSHER

Kevin Cook

When a man dies in another life, and he was a very evil man, he gets reincarnated as a writer. That is the way the fates have of getting back at us. There is a fine red line between seeing the obvious that the rest never see ("You *see*, Watson, but you do not observe.") and seeing what probably isn't even there. Writer as interpreter between common man and mad man. It may be that the worst torture in the world is sitting at a typewriter with empty fingers. Sitting there with the thing buzzing in your face, rows of secretive letters daring you to string out the ones that make a good story, or a great novel. The odds against hitting the right combination for a great novel are about the same as the odds against hitting the trifecta in a race with twenty-six horses. A hundred thousand times in a row. Torture will make you mad, given world enough and time.

They do it anyway, though, dozens and thousands of them, with the smell of the whole day in their shirts, snapping at the letters, knowing down deep in their fingers every time they go off the trail of the magic combination, staying there in front of the slot machine, pouring in their round silver souls and dehydrating just a little bit more when what comes back out is nothing.

I knew the man you've been wondering about, the one they say almost won the Nobel Prize for Literature. They were going to give it to him until they found out what he had done, and then they went back and fixed everything so it looked like he had never even been considered. Or so the story goes. But he *was* considered. I could prove it, given time enough and freedom.

Nobel invented dynamite, did you know that? That's the reason he set up the Nobel Prizes, to make up for his invention's killing thousands of people, blowing the dust and pebbles up around and through their bodies, leaving little clods of dirt hanging in the air in front of their wide-opened eyes. He wanted to salve his conscience, so he could die (of natural causes; he was not blown up) without feeling guilty. Does that make up for making dynamite?

But should he have to make up for it? Somebody would have invented it anyway, and he never actually personally hurt anybody, as far as I know. He never blew anybody's legs off six feet away from their stumps. Maybe he's responsible, and maybe he's not. Maybe God's responsible. He made Nobel. Maybe He's responsible for all the bloody burned disasters that ever happened—for Auschwitz and Dachau, for Hiroshima and the Crucifixion. And he never even bothered to set up a prize fund.

Anyway—in any case—be that as it may—I knew the man who knew how to hit the trifecta on the typewriter. He's in a home now. Well, a hospital. It isn't anybody's home. The man is not myself. True or false?

Oh Jesus they are coming again. They're coming to take me away. Ha ha. I can hide beside the radiator. But no, they can smell me out, my arm is burning against the steaming metal. Two big all-white men with no faces. They don't really want to short out my mind, they would just as soon sit and read magazines or go play with the young girls in their ward who can't move to get away, but they are told it's time for electroshock therapy so they come for me and put me on the hard bed with the metal and rough-brown-cloth skullcap that goes around my head and the tight snares that go around my wrists and feet so that I can't move anything except the muscles in my stomach which twitch and try to run away because they know what is coming.

No. No no please Jesus Christ don't TURN IT ON
 JESUS CHRIST LOOK AT HIM DANCE
 COME ON HEMINGWAY FRY FRY AGAIN
 GOD DAMN THAT STINKS
 HOW MUCH LONGER WE GOT

When I am away because it hurts so much, because there is a dentist's drill spinning in my eyes and in my genitals and there is boiling mercury being poured into my head and they have sawed open my skull and are holding my brain against a red-hot stove, all of those things at once but much worse (I am not a genius, at least not any more, but even if I were I could not tell you how the pain is when they send electricity into your brain and roast what you are thinking, and you die but stay alive and never know how different you are afterward. But try to imagine

whatever it was in your life that made you *pray* to die, and then try to imagine that every cell in your body wants to die, all of them in symphony that way, and I suppose that will have to do), when I am away because my head is too full of screaming for anything else to be in there, sometimes I see colors humming out in space like long beautiful fishes miles deep in the sea. Sometimes while they are destroying my brain and I can't reach my typewriter, I think up stories and things that have happened in my life and sort of intertwine them, like I'm doing right now. I hope the screaming doesn't stop, because I am here creating and when it stops I will have to go back and hurt and my body will try to heal, like a little fetus that just keeps on breathing and feeding while the blade is on its way in.

There are books in the Library of Congress that have never been touched since some gray-suited, skinny, bespectacled librarian first put them on the shelves. There are ancient newspapers on microfilm, obscure magazine articles, people's letters to each other, wills, memoranda from people who thought they were writing to themselves or to confidants. Nothing will ever be completely forgotten from this century on, nothing lost.

I was a good researcher, and I spent years in the Library (never once saw a congressman), smelling first the crackling yellow musty smell of old paper and later the buzzing white ozone smell of soft fluorescent lights. A lot of times I would follow long threads that offered themselves, threads that didn't have anything to do with a story or a book. I found out things that no one else knows. Maybe about you. You're in the Library of Congress, there under the weight of tons of shiny microfilm, the weight of all the little transparent bodies of everybody else. Everything is there, all in black and white, unprotected by the glossy mythicism of history. Check into your illusions, your ideals; check out your great men. They were all hated for one reason and another, and they were pretty good reasons. One of Jefferson's slaves died one morning in 1772, beaten to death by the massah. Lincoln got a man off in a rape case to pay back a political favor. Mary Baker Eddy had a stash of aspirin hidden away in that big white bonnet of hers. True or false? The Pope isn't Catholic. Malcom X loved watermelon and Amos 'n Andy, and Martin Luther King cheated on his wife and was shot to death by a man under orders from J. Edgar Hoover, who had tried to have Castro poisoned for John Kennedy, who was being treated for a social disease when he was killed and whose brother swam away from a girl drowning in a river. True or false? When I was a little boy I poured ammonia into my

little black dog's eyes and then he was blind. That's in the Library somewhere.

Some of that is true. Or, I should say, all of it is true, probably, but I haven't proved it all yet.

Do you think that if they sent raw telephone cables all through the Library of Congress and let them dance around burning things and shearing the words away from their places and going down the shelves incinerating all the ideas, that when the Librarian of Congress came back he could ever find anything left that made sense?

Once when I was a writer I would sit for hours at the keyboard. I had a blue electric portable, a "Sterling Automatic 12." I would start working, describing all the things that were going on in some parallel plane that I was helping to make, and look up at the digital clock on my desk ten minutes later. Only the clock would say it was three hours later, and the rest of the world went along with the clock. That was time travel. If you're a writer you can travel in time. I have always thought that if I were a better one maybe I could start late one night and when I would look up at the clock it would be the end of time. I would get up. The muscles in my calves would be stiff, and moths would have eaten away at my clothes until the moths had all finally died. I would go over to my window and there would be only the darkness of the deepest space, because I had been working when God had taken everything back and He had missed me. Then I would go back to my typewriter, but I would have a mental block. I would type a long series of periods, tiny pictures of the empty universe, until the bones in my hands wore down and then I would have to type the periods with my nose until it wore down, and then I guess I would just have to lie there with my face down among the keys, smelling that inky humming smell forever and ever amen.

I was a very serious writer, seriously grim, and I would become frustrated and histrionic when the words I wrote couldn't describe the pictures in my mind. I got something of a reputation for the way I disposed of the bad stuff. Didn't throw it in the wastebasket like you're supposed to; I threw it in the toilet, saying that it was shit and that was where it belonged. The Roto-Rooter bills were high, but the reporters and reviewers (especially one that came out from the *Times Review of Books*) thought it added to my image as the tough-minded, elemental realist (the one from the *Times* kept calling me a "naturalist." I felt like I should have been out in a safari suit looking through my binoculars at elephants). I was going to win the Dynamite Prize for Literature. True or false?

True.

When I was twenty and the girl I loved suddenly noticed that I wasn't at all what she was in the market for, I went into my room and wrote stories that leaked out the black acids inside of me.

When I was twenty-two and the girl I loved suddenly married the architect she had been engaged to all along, I went into my room and wrote poetry. Try something else this time. When all the bad poems were flushed out of my veins and arteries, I came back out.

When I was forty and the girl I loved suddenly died in a completely ridiculous traffic accident, I went into my den and tore apart my typewriter until there was blood and ink all over my hands because the writing never helped, and then I wrote a novel in longhand, and then I went back to my wife, whose face was too serene.

I was about to be a Laureate. I was a very good researcher, and got my hands on some things no one should have let me see, but I was, after all, a medium-sized celebrity. In a short story that was only published because my editor was certain that everything in it was just clever speculation, I told a tale about some people who used a thick blue liquid to kill some other people, and there was a man in the story who knew all about how you went about making the blue liquid, and the knowledge was too much for him to seal up inside, so he told it all, down to the last detail, to a sympathetic character. He told it down to the last molecule. The last atom. Now you remember it. A very effective story. They didn't come for me until seven hundred and eighteen people in Jerusalem were sprayed with the thick blue liquid and spat up blood and bile and acid and then parts of the linings of their stomachs, and some hours later they spat up much of their insides and the skin on their faces dripped down and stuck to their teeth and I did a long and very effective description of the process in the story so I won't repeat it here and as you can see I was a good researcher.

Did you know any of those people? Surely they weren't relatives, or friends. I'm sorry. And they say there were a few more scattered incidents before they got their hands on the raw materials. I'm so sorry. I would cry and never stop if it would do any good. I am crying now and may never stop and it won't do any good. I am here now, and that won't do any good. I am here because they say (they are the men and women with no faces who work here. On me.) that I lost my mind. They are trying very hard to find it.

Metaphor flusher
Going to the fair
Little key crusher
Truth is your affair
Try to write a prayer
Empty empty air

It was the truth. It seemed a whimsy to put it in there, to see if anybody was paying attention, to see if the secret agents would come to rough me up and find out how I knew. I thought maybe it wasn't even correct.

No. That's false. They tried to hide it, to shuffle tons of sheets of paper over their Auschwitz, because the land of the free and the home of the brave could not be diseased enough to consider such things. But she had considered them. She had painted her fingernails blue with the stuff and then scratched at the faces of her laboratory animals, some of whom were whimpering prayers at the time. Some of whom had their upper lips melt into their open mouths. I had followed a thread, a peripheral strand that led way, way down into the truth. Nothing is hidden from a good enough researcher with time enough and freedom.

The truth. Shall make you free. Could have thrown it in the toilet. No, false. It would have burst the pipes, seeped up out of the ground, spun in the air until it congealed into a glowing green glass eye that watched me in the dark. Shall make you mad. If I left money for a prize, would they forgive me? False. It was the truth. I was insane. I sat and wrestled with my hands for two months, and somehow the truth slipped out of them like a firefly you think is held tightly in the darkness, and I pretended it was whimsy. The truth the truth the truth I ran it down but it was too big for me and then it killed me and escaped. True?

If God is truth, eternal truth, then God is a blue liquid shot through with tiny green specks that look out at you like little glowing glassy eyes, that will turn a person into a running plasticky sore that has to swallow itself in gulps as it gasps for its last breath.

Don't pull me back. All the bloody colors in the sea whirl down into the drain at the bottom of the Marianas Trench.

No. At least not SO FAST
STILL HOPPIN HE'S STILL HOPPIN
EYES ARE BLEEDIN YELLOW LOOK
OKAY IT'S OFF NOW
PICK HIM UP
CAREFUL HE'S HOT

Oh can't you let me be what am I now
Hours. Later. True or false?

When they take the live wire and electrocute my brain it goes in there and takes those waves, those peaks and valleys that show whether I am thinking or not, and shakes and bakes them, turns them upside down and inside out so that they can never find again the pattern they came from. I know they do it all the time, in mental prisons all over the land-of-the-free-and-the-home-of-the-brave, but rape with a live wire a thousand times is still rape.

But there is something wayway down there underneath all the rest, hiding, that is me. The truth of me. Something just barely apart from the shockwaves. They have cut it, bled it, raped it. Not killed it yet. But it smells the lightning bolts as they shriek down into all the most private corners, feeling for it. It is a wet and matted tiny frightened fox, and soon it will be flushed out of the dark warm woods to run away, the fateful lightning's naked prey.