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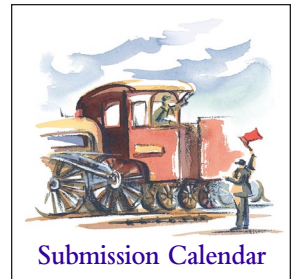


Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What goals do you set for yourself when you begin a new novel?

For each new novel, I come up with a trick—a puzzle to solve—that’s just for me. In *The Patron Saint of Liars*, the trick was to write a novel, which I didn’t know how to do. I feel like the real shortcoming of that book is that it’s completely out of time. It has no responsibility to anything—to the calendar, to the clock, to government. There’s one moment that tags that book in time: when Rose picks up a hitchhiker who has gone AWOL during the Vietnam War. With *Taft*, I wanted to write a book set in a real city, with real issues, and with real time. In *The Magician’s Assistant*, part of the puzzle was to write in third person, although I think that failed because the third-person viewpoint is close to a first-person one. I also wanted to have a book in which the main character dies in the first sentence and yet still maintains his status as the main character with only nominal flashbacks. He is kept alive through conversation and thought. And then with *Bel Canto*, it was, “What if the characters don’t



have a common language? How do you move a book forward without language?” That took me to music. ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

What drew you to the particular aspects of the spelling bee as the backdrop for your first novel, and how did you go about inhabiting Eliza’s character?

What drew me to spelling bees was losing. I read an essay in *Granta* that talked about spelling bees in terms of all the people who lose the bee rather than the one person who wins. I had never thought about it that way. I thought, “Oh my God, we’re all losers.” That’s when I realized I wanted to do something with it. From there I went to the national spelling bee and observed the kids and took notes. That’s where Eliza was born, watching those kids and getting a sense of what they were like. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*How did you first conceive of *The Hours*, both conceptually and then structurally, and in terms of the three female characters?*

Like the different voices in *Home at the End of the World*, the triptych structure of *The Hours* evolved in the writing. It was originally intended to be a contemporary retelling of *Mrs. Dalloway*, set among gay men in Chelsea. It was going to center on a gay man of fifty-two, the same age Clarissa Dalloway is in Woolf’s novel, and he was going to be as constrained and oppressed by his age, in a youth-worshipping world, as Clarissa was by the fact that she was a woman in the 1920s. Like Clarissa he was going to have a party—a Chelsea-boy party, full of handsome men of a certain age who were almost unnaturally fit and well groomed—at which he’d have an epiphany something like Clarissa’s at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

As I worked on it, though, it felt thin; it felt like a semi-interesting idea that didn’t really justify an entire novel. So I tried it different ways. I experimented with adding Virginia Woolf, first as a sort of ghost who haunted my efforts to capture her novel and, later, as a character unto herself. I made my Clarissa into a woman, because the more I thought about *Mrs. Dalloway* the novel, the more convinced I became that it was deeply and utterly about women.



Photo: David Shankbone

The Hours still didn't gel, though. It was when I added the third woman, Laura Brown, loosely based on my mother, that the book found its form. Suddenly I had an invented day in the life of an invented person (Clarissa), an invented day in the life of a real person (Woolf), and a real day in the life of a real person (Laura, a.k.a. my mother). I also had a character, a writer, and a reader. Then all I had to do was write the damned thing. ■

BENJAMIN PERCY, interviewed by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum:

I begin with an image. Or a voice. Characters come alive. A world comes alive. I never have my themes preplanned when I first set out. ■

MARY GAITSKILL, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Novels and stories occur for every writer in different ways. Edwidge Danticat told me, "The stories come sometimes in one line or one scene. I've had many, many stories where I had ten pages and nothing was happening, and I put those away, sometimes for many years." How do your novels or stories come to you?

It's similar to what she was saying. I sometimes get an idea for a book or story with an image, or a single event, or a personality. *Veronica* was more about a personality through which I connected to the subjects of illness and mortality and beauty. It was a crude juxtaposition that had a lot of power for me—and I'm not using the word *crude* in a negative sense here. The novel I'm working on now started with an image of the weather being embodied in human form. I have no idea what it has to do with the book in rational terms. Before that, I was thinking of the book in terms of characters and how these characters would come into play with each other. But I didn't sit down to write until I got this image of the weather as people. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

In many ways, The Feast of Love is about breaking the rules of fiction. The character Bradley even tells Charlie that he can't start his novel, also titled The Feast of Love, with a character waking up, which is how your novel begins.

Some reviewers have taken me to task for breaking that rule. Some creative-writing teachers tell students, "Don't start a story with a character waking up in bed," but it's by no means a universal rule. ■

AMY BLOOM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I spend a lot of time looking out the window, walking around the house, watching daytime television, talking to my friends, going to the grocery store. There's probably material anywhere you look. Everybody's lives are full and mysterious and unexpected. It's just a question of whether or not you're paying attention, whether or not you want to stand around long enough to let them tell it to you, or imagine it. ■

JAVIER MARÍAS, interviewed by Eli S. Evans:

Some writers have decided everything before they start, and they know what's going to happen to everyone and when, and how many chapters they're going to have, and so on. They have it all planned. I remember, for instance, that I was rather close to the end of *A Man of Feeling*, and I still hadn't decided if someone was going to die or not, and, if so, who. Of course, once a book is finished, it seems impossible that the story would be different from the way it finally was. But I remember very well not having decided what was going to happen, or to whom. And then you decide. This doesn't mean that the characters are, as some writers say, suddenly alive, somehow, and they rebel. This seems ludicrous to me. Some writers have this odd feeling, just because they decided to do something different than what they had originally planned—but you're still always deciding. But it's true that, for me, it's not just about finding out how the story goes or how it ends, but it's also that I usually understand the whole book only when I have finished, or only as I am finishing it.

I've said many times, and I'm afraid I also said this to the *Paris Review*, that some writers, those who know everything ahead of time, who have everything planned, work with a map. They know what they're going to find along the way of writing, and they can see that here we'll have a cliff, and here a desert will come, and then two rivers, and then a precipice... Which doesn't mean that to cross a desert or jump off a cliff is not difficult, but they already know what they're going to find. Then there are some writers, the kind to which I belong, who don't have a map; the only thing we have is a compass. That means we more or less know where we're heading, where we want to go, but we don't know how, absolutely, and we find the river and the desert and cliff unexpectedly, and say, Oh, dear, a desert now, let's cross it.

So do you begin, then, when you have a direction?

More than one critic has pointed out that if you take my novels, and take the first paragraph, or sometimes even the first sentence, you usually have a plan of the whole book. Not a summary, of course, but in a way, they say, the book is contained, somehow, in the very first sentences. So perhaps when I begin, I somehow know toward where I'm heading, even if I can't quite see it yet. ■

RON CARLSON,

interviewed by Susan McInnis:

For those who aren't familiar with it, Kotzebue is stark and wind-riven. It lies on a spit of Alaska's northwest coast, just across the Bering Strait from Siberia, and is home to about three thousand people. Inupiat people have lived on and around the same land for over six centuries. How did you happen to visit Kotzebue? Were you researching or writing, or both?



I was living in Utah in the eighties, working for arts councils in Idaho, Utah, and Alaska, and the work took me north twice. I went out to Aniak—which is quite a bit south and inland from Kotzebue and Nome, but still in western Alaska—and once for two weeks to Kotzebue. I was teaching in the local schools in both towns, and spent my free time just tramping about. People took care of me in both places. They took me out for plane rides and showed me their world. Both towns struck me as being very serious ventures, both having serious elements of the frontier about them. That atmosphere and the unforgiving nature of weather there marked me.

I suppose, without knowing it, I was gathering data. It certainly came back for me later. It's interesting to consider what rains back down on you from your life—the things that come get you and haunt you and bother you, things that may or may not end up in the writing.

That's where "Blazo" got its start: I actually did hear dogs barking in an airplane once. I was flying from Anchorage to Kotzebue, and the flight out was terrifying. Somehow the dogs were a comfort. Later, when I was in Kotzebue, there were dogs loose around town. Two or three were rogues, and they were raising hell with the sled dogs, very valuable working dogs. The sheriff was out hunting them. From time to time I'd hear gunfire, and it lent an edge to my sense of life there. I wasn't used to any of it—the barking, the rogue dogs, the gunfire. It all stayed with me, and then it came back in "Blazo." ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Story ideas come in many different ways. Sometimes I'll overhear something. As you know, writers are great eavesdroppers. Whenever I'm at a gathering, I'm participating, but a lot of times I'm just being quiet and listening. I get ideas from things I see in newspapers and magazines, from other writers, from things that happen in my life, in the lives of other people I know. But ultimately the source of all writing is mysterious. It comes from some deep place. We call it the imagination, or we could call it the creative mind. The ability to transform these nuggets from life into art comes from the creative mind.

What is your process like for writing a short story?

A lot of times I'll start with an image. I'm a very visual person, and in some ways I have to see the character doing something before I start the story. It's the same way for my novels. For example, in *The Mistress of Spices* I got a series of strong visual images of an old woman in a little Indian grocery. It was a sensory experience: I could smell the spices, I could see the place, and I could *feel* it. That began the writing process. With many of my stories, it works in the same way. The image I get won't necessarily be the beginning image of the story when the story is complete. It could be the ending image. Sometimes I have to figure my way out backwards. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Sometimes things really do grow from the reading and the research, but it's always in such odd ways. Often it's a picture, a visual image; sometimes it's an image in words, a sense of somebody on a dock or in a room holding a bandage. Sometimes a whole area of subject matter will seem interesting to me. That's what happened with "The Cure" in *Servants of the Map*. I used to drive through Saranac Lake a lot on my way to someplace else. I never stopped to look around, but it imprinted itself on me. I got curious about the porches, and then curious about the people who would've been on the porches, and then curious about the state of society that would've led everybody to be clumped in one place on the porches. ■

ROY PARVIN, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Usually the impulse to write the story is a very tiny thing. In the story “In the Snow Forest,” I had bought a throwing knife, an antique throwing knife. I was walking around and I thought, Well, wouldn’t this be wonderful to put in a story? It’s really a minor part of the story, but it was one of the keys that opened the door that got me started. ■

PAM DURBAN, interviewed by Cheryl Reid:

What about the origin of the story “Soon”?

I have a friend in town who’s a collector of folk art and Southern memorabilia. He bought a huge collection of family possessions from a woman who was a descendent of a major plantation owner. People have said it is one of the most important collections of Southern artifacts. It’s got everything: diaries, plantation ledgers, slave-sewn shirts. He made me a copy of the diary and gave it to me and also told me about the old woman whom he’d bought this stuff from. He basically courted her for a year in the nursing home. She was a mean woman who had disowned her children. I started looking at her diary and her diary literally opens with that scene of being blinded by the doctor. And that started “Soon,” along with that woman’s character. I think all of my stories start from character. Something about a character will catch my attention or my imagination. ■

HA JIN, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I usually begin with a kind of feeling triggered by an event or something that will bother me. That’s the best situation. If something bothers me, I have to write about it in order to let the feeling out. That usually produces the best outcome. But stories don’t always come that way, especially with a novel. It may start with an event or a feeling, but down the road there will be a lot of labor and research depending on how much energy I have and how stubborn I am. ■

ALICE MATTISON, interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

The very first poem in that collection [Animals], called “Secret Animals,” has a set of twins who are joined at the spine, and who bear a child. That means

the image of conjoined twins was with you some thirty years before you wrote your latest novel, The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman, in which the image literally takes center stage, when some of the characters put on a play of that name.

I know. I keep returning to the image of conjoined twins. They are in my first novel, *Field of Stars*, too. In the poem and that novel, someone fears giving birth to conjoined twins. When I was pregnant with my third child I had that fear, and wrote the poem. Years later at a reading a woman in the audience asked if the conjoined twins could be an image of the connection of the pregnant mother and child, if my fear was that the child wouldn't ever be separate from me. I thought, Wow, I bet that's right. I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote that poem, but I do think the fear of conjoined twins is a fear of infringement on solitude. Of never being alone. As a writer, you have these images in your head and sometimes you have to go with them, or otherwise they'll go against you.

Does that mean that your material—your subject matter—has been with you, even if only subconsciously, from the beginning?

You don't know all your material, but you are who you are. Whatever your obsessions, or neuroses or fears, they probably are ones that you will continue to have. There is something about that image that is very powerful for me, and mysterious, and rather dreadful. I don't mean to use it again. I vow that I won't and then I do. ■

MARY GORDON, interviewed by
Charlotte Templin:

One of the things that I do with my fiction students is to get them to try to consider that every family has a way of doing things. Then you bring your friend home from college and they say, "Why do you put the Kleenex in the piano bench?" You say, "Everybody puts the Kleenex in the piano bench." Your friend says, "No, they don't." So I think all families have odd ways of doing things that are considered very normal in the family or else are just puzzles that you can imagine have the inexplicability of the holy trinity. But I think that's an interesting way of looking at the family. You know how they inhabit oddly without realizing that it is odd.



Photo: Emma Dodge Hanson

For example, in my grandmother's house, why did my uncle sleep on the porch? There were two spare bedrooms upstairs. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with an idea, but that doesn't happen often. Often they come to me through my reading. I see some little picture or some phrase that captures my fancy. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE, *interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:*

I was in Massachusetts, a little discouraged with my own work, as happens off and on in a long career, and one of my children had just dropped out of college. So I was feeling blue, thinking about this child, wondering what might be going on with her.

I started [*Glimmer*] with a sentence and an image of a girl, an unreliable narrator with a skewed sense of reality—locked in her dorm room believing a man just outside her door is trying to come in. Is he there? Is anything she tells us true? That the girl has a black father, which is true, and a dead mother who she describes as living came to me from nowhere, or perhaps somewhere. That's always the wonder and mystery of writing. I know the book had something to do with sadness for my own child who needed to come home, with alienation and otherness. ■

AMY BLOOM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What inspired you to write the title story in A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You?

I had done all this research for a nonfiction piece on female-to-male transsexuals. It just stayed with me, particularly because I found myself thinking about how hard it would be for me if one of my daughters said to me that God made a mistake, and that she was supposed to be a man and she wanted to have the surgery. As devoted as I am to each one of them, and as fond as I am of them, I would support them in doing what they needed to do, but it would break my heart to lose my girls. And that's what I was thinking, and started developing this character Jane, the mother who wishes to do right in her own way. Her story is completely different for her

than it is for the daughter/son. For him it's a story of liberation, and for Jane it's a story of loss. ■

RICHARD BAUSCH, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How do you find subjects for your work?

Well, most of the time, they find me. They occur to me in the flow of experience. "Aren't You Happy for Me?" came about when I was watching the movie *Father of the Bride* with my daughter and some folks—you know, the Steve Martin remake of that flick. He's talking about a quarter of a million dollars for his daughter's wedding, and I said to my daughter Emily, "Did you do the math on this?" She said, "It's a lot of money." I said, "\$250,000. That's \$249,000 more than I'm going to spend on your wedding." We were joking around about it. I went upstairs, and I thought, What if there was something really hard? You know, in the movie, the kid is going to be a world-class geophysicist or something. He comes from a wonderful family. He's supposed to be a wonderful kid. But what if there is something really, really hard? What if she was calling her father to tell him she is marrying someone who is old enough to be his father? And then she's pregnant—the whole thing of adding trouble. What if the father's splitting up with her mother and he has news for her? It sort of wrote itself. One version ended with the wife saying, "Maybe they will be happy for a time. Weren't we? Weren't we?" I thought that's too Salingeresque. I decided to go on and say some more stuff. That took about three days to write from beginning to end. ■

ANNIE PROULX, interviewed by *Michael Upchurch:*

As I was finishing up *Postcards*, the idea for *The Shipping News* came to me; all of it hung on a guy that I'd seen on the ferry. There was a man on the ferry who was coming back from the mainland, and he was drunk and he stayed up all night. Skinny guy with red hair and violet-colored plastic sandals: women's sandals. And he sang all night long while everyone around him was trying to go to sleep. He sang about not being able to find a job, and coming back, and what was the use, and so forth, in this very low voice.

I was seated right behind him. I could hear it fairly well, found it fascinat-

ing, wrote some of it down. So he was in mind to work into this story about shipping news. I wanted to write about the fact that there were no jobs and that the fishery was collapsing and unfolding and falling down. And, actually, he evaporated from the story. Only his plastic sandals stayed in, with the guy who sells Quoyle the boat. That was all that was left of him. But he more or less set the story going. ■

DAVID MALOUF, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

Frequently, I'll begin with a scene, sometimes involving one or two characters and their surroundings. I will then say to myself, Who are these people; what's this all about? Or I will say, What kind of world are these characters in; what's going to happen to them? I often have a feeling about something and will write the first paragraph in order to get it going. The first task is to strike the right tone. I often don't have much idea about what's going to happen as far as plot goes. I may have a strong sense of a life or of a person. Often, that comes from something I've heard. This could be as simple as somebody telling you a story and you think, Oh, what an interesting idea that is. And then you make up characters. But often I begin and don't have a clear idea of the character at all. Somebody, then, will suddenly pop into a paragraph, and she may even turn out to be the main character. ■



Photo: Conrad del Villar

HA JIN, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Mr. Yang [in The Crazy], hospitalized after having a stroke, raves about events that could be from his life or not. His crazy behavior sets Jian Wan to trying to sort out what is real and what is not, both in what Mr. Yang is saying and in his own life. What drew you to the idea of juxtaposing an old man who's losing his mind with a young man at the beginning of his life, who up until now has behaved quite rationally?

I did nurse a professor two afternoons. He wasn't my professor, so I didn't look after him for long. He had a stroke, and he began speaking nonsense and truth at the same time. I was shocked and haunted by that. His own students who looked after him talked a lot about this with me. This is a kind of universal case in which a man has lost the lock on his heart. He

can't keep his secrets anymore. What would happen if he didn't have any restraint? Then the truth could be disastrous to his family and others. That's how I was really bothered by this memory. I wanted to write a story that was both an old man's and a young man's. ■

BARBARA SCOT, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

I had returned after a long, long absence, and found a trunk of things that my mother had left for me, and in there was a box of letters—the letters were relatives' letters to her and first drafts of her letters, and they detailed the story of her brief, unhappy marriage—and this very mysterious note with three puzzling lines: "What do you think? You don't understand. You'll never know how much." They were all wrapped in her wedding dress. I waited ten years before I tackled it. ■

DAN CHAON, interviewed by Misha Angrist:

Let's talk about beginnings. In a couple of stories, you start by dropping the reader right into the scene by literally presenting him with an object or situation, almost as though you are holding them in your hands: "Here is a snake with a girl in his mouth." "This is a braid of human hair." It's very effective. Are those beginnings critical to how the stories subsequently unfold?

Most of the time they are. I began those two stories ["Passengers, Remain Calm," "Falling Backwards"] with those specific images in mind—they were the driving forces that got me to sit down and write the stories. Other times I start with a premise; for example, in the title story ["Among the Missing"] I began with the family drowning in the lake near the mother's cabin. But in the two stories you mentioned, I was beginning with an image and then trying to discover the story. ■

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

You started writing Severance before the horrible beheadings began in Iraq. Is it weird for you, that you were writing them as they began?

Beheadings have always been with us, though they've become much more central recently. Yeah, it is odd how that has come forward. The book began when Elizabeth and I were in Saigon in early 1995, and we went to

the war-crimes museum in Saigon and saw an old French guillotine. Standing in the presence of a guillotine, I began to meditate on that object and then did some reading about it and discovered quickly that there was a lot of thought, a lot of suspicion that, far from being a quick and painless and humane form of execution, that there was something going on inside those heads after the blade fell, and what more dramatic moment could there be than the last thoughts after beheading and before death. As a fiction writer I was intrigued by them.

I discovered a very strict form that made it even more interesting to me. There was honestly a lot of speculation, if this does happen, about how long the time period is. Some people think only a few seconds. There were some doctors who thought in terms of the way sugars are turned into proteins and so forth, that it could be six minutes. So the doctor quote is a kind of composite; a minute and a half seemed in a nice sort of moderate, in-between. A believable thing. And of course it is true that we speak at about 160 words per minute in a heightened state of emotion. It seemed to me an interesting notion. It's almost I guess a poetic impulse, isn't it? It's such chaos, the thought of those last wild musings after such an event, that I liked imposing this kind of strict form on it. Each story is exactly 240 words long. Some of the pieces are more or less full lives that are flashing, but in others there are seemingly trivial moments which were not, apparently, so trivial. ■

GEORGE MAKANA CLARK, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies*

Last night there was a television show we were watching while we were getting the baby into bed, and it was a documentary on emergency medical technicians, and they spoke about a "golden hour," when a person would live or wouldn't live as they're trying to get them through the emergency. I thought that would be a wonderful time for a story to take place. ■

ALBERTO RÍOS, *interviewed by Susan McInnis*:

I can start writing a story anywhere and as long as I write long enough, I will eventually tell a story. I don't think I necessarily have to impose plot, but plot I think is an organic thing much like getting on a boat and just going with it.

You've been doing this as writer and professor in a class you laughingly call

Obsessions. But it's serious, yes?

It's very serious. I think it has transformed students. It has changed their way of thinking and of writing. It's an exciting notion. Each student comes up with one image. One student chose most recently "Two people drinking from the same glass." Very simple. Just a short phrase. Each student begins with a piece of writing based on their chosen image. A poem, perhaps. They stay with the image for the rest of the semester. That's all they write about. It would seem impossible to write for three or four months about a single image. But if you can do it, the result is magical: If you can draw the rabbit out of this top hat, you will be amazed by what's possible in the world, in all those things around you.

So, we begin with the image. We extend it first backward, rather than forward, because I don't think you should always go forward. So we go a little bit backward, to a sentence that is that image, and then to a word that is that image—not that describes the image, but is the thing. We are trying to get at what language represents. What is that image? And then we go to a letter, just as I was talking about earlier. We find a letter that is the image of two people drinking out of the same glass. It may be visual. It may have some meaning. It may be any number of things, but we find the letter that is it.

Then we go forward again. At this point it's like pulling a slingshot backward. When you let go of it, then you can go forward like crazy, and you've got so much farther to go if you've gone backward first. Suddenly that image has all sorts of potential. We then write it as a short story, as a prose scene, as epistolary writing, characters writing to each other. And after you've explored it, obviously you must add things, and that's what's fun. You start adding characters and setting, and it's just to accommodate the image. But in fact, you're doing all the right things you ought to do as a writer. By the end of the semester, we come back to the original form. If you wrote a poem at the beginning of the semester, then you write a poem again at the end. But the difference between those two poems, after millions of miles of exploration, is extraordinary, and it's what my students learn to call craft. That there's that much even in the single image. ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Usually the first line comes to me a long time before I start the novel. This is true of *The Magician's Assistant*. I had the first line for a year before I

started writing it. I think this is true of each novel, that I had the first line before I had anything else.

What do you think makes a great opening?

It's one of those things, you know it when you see it. ■

PATRICIA HENLEY, interviewed by
Andrew Scott:



In the River Sweet began as a short story about a family in which the father and husband had been a POW in Vietnam. It was about the life the mother led while the father was a POW. I love doing the research for writing fiction, so I found myself lugging home library books about POWs. I thought, I'm doing an awful lot of research for a short story and I began to build the idea for *In the River Sweet*. I did the library research and planned a trip to Vietnam. I was writing scenes, but I knew something was missing.

The strand of the story about the hate crime came late in the conceptualizing. I abandoned 150 pages and started over because the presence of the hate crime provided me with the first line and the stripped-down, close to the consciousness of the character's voice. Once I received that first line—"Jesus would not say *fag*, she knew that much"—I wrote the manuscript in ten months. ■

JUDITH McCLAIN:

The birth of a story or novel always begins with an image for me, sometimes accompanied by the first several lines or, if I'm lucky, a whole paragraph. If the image sticks, I write the story. If it flees, I don't.

In his preface to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, William Gass says, "From the outset, however, I was far too concerned with theme. I hadn't discovered yet what I would later find was an iron law of composition for me: the exasperatingly slow search among the words I had already written for the words which were to come...so that each work would seem simply the first paragraph rewritten, swollen with sometimes years of scrutiny around that initial verbal wound..."

It's true for me too: I begin—and end—with that initial verbal wound. I seem to forget this each time I enter a new story. I am ever hopeful that a story will take me someplace else, that the first paragraph is merely a launch into dark space, new territory. Time and time again, however, the process proves to me that the entire story exists in the initial paragraph; that rather than moving away from that first image, my process is to enter inside of it somehow, by swelling each fragment and making a descent. I am not launched from the beginning so much as sucked inside a bunch of words with incredible force. ■

NOMI EVE, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I have had this picture in my head for three years now, this picture of Chasia just sitting in that carriage. This one image. That's what I write from. I write from these single images that get stuck in my head. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Did you always have the opening line, "I do not love mankind"?

When Peggy was going to narrate the book [*The Giant's House*], that was always the first line. The only immortality I ask is that fifty years from now, in the back of literary magazines when they have quizzes where you match the first line of the book up with the book title—I want to be in those quizzes. I don't understand books that begin, "It was June." I don't understand why you would start your book that way. I don't object to the sentence when I am further into the book, but when I read books, I want to know something about the writer and the book from the first sentence. ■

ROY PARVIN, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I was wondering about what starts a story for you.

A lot of them are images and very vague feelings. And hopefully the images remain but the vagueness goes away and it becomes specific. I find that the journey that the writer goes through is that the vague becomes specific. I thought it'd be really interesting to write a book about snow, to have a metaphor that changes, the way metaphors should, and to have that over the course of three very long stories. And from there I kept thinking, you

know, I wanted to write about people in their forties because that interests me because I'm in my forties. When you're in your forties, the idea of precociousness goes away. You can't really be precocious unless you *die* early, I suppose. Where we are is probably different from what we imagined when we were younger. And where we thought we were going is probably also different. There's a certain fork in the road that happens. It might be a slight fork, but nonetheless it's a fork.

Doesn't mean there aren't more forks waiting, but still.

Right. But it's sort of like the midterm exam. And I found it really very valuable. I found that things that had interested me in my twenties and thirties didn't anymore. I had written to a friend from college that I imagined my life being like a booster rocket. There's a booster rocket that went from twenty to forty, and that fell away. And there's another booster that takes you from forty to I don't know when. Maybe twenty-year increments are appropriate. Maybe it's ten years. And so I thought, Well, this would be a very interesting thing to write about. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The stories sometimes come in one line or one scene or, rarely, but it happens, fully formed. I've had many stories where I had ten pages and nothing was happening, and I put those away and pick them up much later. There's a deepening that comes with time that adds richness to a story. ■

MATTHEW SHARPE, interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

The *Sleeping Father* begins with a description of circumstance. "Chris Schwartz's father's Prozac dosage must have been incorrect, because he awoke one morning to discover that the right side of his face had gone numb. This was the second discovery on a journey Chris's father sensed would carry him miles from the makeshift heaven of health." Do you believe that circumstance is a particularly effective means of enticing readers?

I don't think I have one particular way of beginning a book that I use repeatedly, or at least I hope I don't. I borrowed that opening from Kafka. *The Trial* and "Metamorphosis" have similar openings. I wanted that Kafkaesque sense that one's life is about to go out of control, in a terrifying and unknowable and absurd way. That's why I began in this particular story

with circumstance. It is after all a kind of accident that causes the mechanics of the plot; that is, the accident of switching the pills. ■

DANIEL WALLACE, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

You mentioned that you had this great technique that releases stories for you.

Self-deception.

Yes! That, I thought, was marvelous. What were the words again? “It happened...”

“It happened like this, it happens like this.” This gives me the impression that I know what was happening.

So that you could know.

So that I could know eventually what was gonna happen. It’s like taking something up on a dare. Kind of, Oh, sure, I can do that. You don’t know if you can or can’t do it until you attempt it, but you have to give yourself the illusion that you have some sort of power, some sort of control when you really don’t have that much. I don’t feel like I do. People can’t really tell you how they do what they do. This is just one of the many tricks that keep you going. Or as they say in that movie that my son likes to watch, that *Toy Story*: I’m not flying, I’m falling with style. I just know if I couldn’t have lied to myself and believed—that’s the real interesting thing, believing your own lies. It’s kind of like believing that you’re good looking. If you believe it, you can get away with it. Other people start to believe it, too. ■

SUE MILLER,

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Usually they come as a vague notion, an idea of what I want to be talking about. Then I begin to imagine situations which would convey that idea or contain it, and then I begin to people the situations with characters. It starts abstractly for me, but it happens closely together. I’m not pondering an abstraction for a long time. One comes on the heels of another, but it’s the idea that interests me first. ■



AMY BLOOM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Do you find that when you write your early drafts, the beginning you start with is what ends up on the page? For instance, in “Silver Water” we see Rose singing, so that we’re introduced to her gift before we’re introduced to her illness. Is that how you originally began, or did the beginning grow out of the story once it was written?

“Silver Water” had been in my head for about a year. Each scene was pretty clear to me. Some of the middle was muddled, as it often is, but I knew that it would begin with her singing, and end with her killing herself.

Do you typically get the beginning and ending like that?

Well, more than I get the beginning, ending, and middle. Sometimes you just get the beginning, and sometimes you just get the ending, and sometimes you get two lines of dialogue that you carry around for a year wondering, Who’s going to say that? ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, interviewed by Sherry Ellis

When you are writing a story, which usually comes first—plot or character?

There’s no rule. Each story develops in a different way. Sometimes I’ll just start with a feeling. Once I was talking with a poet, and I told her that one of my stories had started with a complex emotion that I had a real need to capture on paper. And then I created an entire story building up to that fleeting moment, so that the reader could experience the exact feeling I had. And the poet said, “Oh, that’s exactly the way I write my poetry.” That was a really nice bonding moment. Or sometimes a story might begin with a dilemma, and I keep writing to see how it’s going to play out. For example, “Egg-Face” is a story that starts with the dilemma of a thirty-year-old woman who’s never had a date or a job. I was interested in her predicament, and I wanted to see where it would take me. Or sometimes a story will start with an interesting little detail, one that often ends up being completely insignificant to the story.

But you have to start somewhere, and a curious fact or detail can get you into a story. For example, in “Since My House Burned Down,” there’s a brief section about a girl practicing her silverware skills so she can go to an omelet parlor. This detail came from a story my grandmother told me about her own youth. When she was growing up, the popular girls would

be invited by their dates to eat at this tiny store that was open only for lunch. They sold a plain American omelet, served with ketchup from a bottle. It was such a status symbol to go there. I loved that story, because it was so funny and odd. I thought I'd start out with it and see what came of it. The story ended up taking off in a completely different direction, and the omelet never became a significant part. But at least it got me started. There are endless ways you can begin a story. Every time I start a new piece, I feel like I'm reinventing the wheel. And I always have this sense of panic, because I feel just as clueless as I did when I wrote my first story. I've never developed a pat system for these things. And I don't ever want to, because then it'll become like a factory, where I'm just cranking out stories from the same basic mold. I like it that each story poses challenges, that you can never rest on your laurels. That keeps it interesting, and rather scary. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE,

interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

What I tend to do is imagine a story or a character or both and live with them in my head for a long time, as much as a year or two. Sometime in the course of imagining, I'll write a couple of sentences. Sort of like yeast. Eventually, I'll start to write. ■





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