

The Writer Rides in Autumn Sunshine

Cold autumn wind blows down from mountain peaks west of me.

I ready my camp for night. I get my notebook and pencils, and I sit down close to my fire and write about where I am and why, in case later, in some hard scrape, I wonder, how the hell did I wind up doing what I'm doing? The sky darkens toward evening. Night smells like campfire smoke and mountains.

When I was a senior in high school, my social studies class rode a big yellow bus to an American Friends Service Committee conference on civil liberties at Asilomar. Somebody circulated a notebook on the way down, and everybody wrote.

I wrote about what I saw out the windows. Suburbs. City. Between cities, fields, meadows, hills. Not enough between.

Our teacher read what we had written in the notebook. She told me, "You have talent. You should write."

So I was a writer. It took me a while to get started, but I knew I would sell stories to *Esquire*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harpers*, *The New Yorker*, for a thousand dollars each. I would buy a Matchless 500 motorcycle with the money from one of those stories and ride wild into many sunsets, gathering new stories.

I almost didn't graduate from High School. I was a rebellious teen-ager more than I was a student, and my smart-ass attitude tried to bite me in the butt. I almost flunked English.

My Social Studies teacher told me she talked to my English teacher. She said, "If you flunk this guy, he'll be here next year. Do we want him here next year?" My Social Studies teacher was tall, blonde, and modern. She almost got fired for her liberal stand on civil liberties. My English teacher was short and broad. I don't know if she had a political life. I don't think so.

My Social Studies teacher thought I should go to college. She thought I was smarter than I realized. I decided she might be right; give it a try. I went to college. In between classes, I worked in service stations, installed lawn watering systems, cut dead trees from the top down and lowered the pieces to the ground with a nylon rope so nothing would fall on

tightly-grouped houses, learned how to do many different things and did many odd jobs.

Coolness of a mountain evening in autumn descends on my darkening camp where I write. The sun falls deeper behind the spinning earth. I slip my jacket on, wind my green silk wild rag twice around my neck and tie it. I check the coffee pot where it sits on the ground, away from the dying coals of my dinner fire. I'll need to climb out of my sleeping bag and piss in the night if I drink coffee, but it would taste good. This writing project grabs me, and I might not be able to quit until past midnight.

I pick up two small sticks and brush coals together, then put the sticks down on glowing coals. Fire erupts from the wood. I scoot the coffee pot into yellow flames. I stare into flames until the coffee boils. Coffee smells blend with other smells of the mountain night. Stars shine brilliantly above me.

I went to college for a while, for as long as I could stand it, but not anywhere near long enough to graduate.

I became a writer. I needed meaning in my existence, but I couldn't get it with religion, as I understood religion, which wasn't much, just what other people said or wrote, nothing direct.

I sold a few poems to small magazines, for a dollar each or two dollars or five dollars, not enough to pay postage for everything I was trying to get published, but enough to encourage me to keep writing.

The editor of *The Fiddlehead* said, "Don't send any more short stories, but we would like to see more poems."

Eventually, I sold him a poem, but he was right. My stories were bad. But I didn't quit. I got better at writing stories. I sold a few stories.

A drunk driver busted me up. He had no insurance, no money, no property, no job. I had no property, no money, no insurance. I've written other stories about how I survived. Read those. Save both of us time, and allow me to stay focused on this story I'm telling you.

For a long time, I didn't write much. When I could, I played guitar and invented songs. I healed enough that I wanted to progress toward my imagined future. I wrote again.

I met and courted Laura. We married and raised two daughters. We took care of a remote ranch in Northeastern Oregon. Wild birds, elk, deer, coyotes, bobcats, wild animals of northeastern Oregon lived on the ranch.

I wrote about the ranch and wildlife. I wrote about educating our daughters ourselves and the close family we

became. I wrote about our creative, rewarding existence, almost outside the consumer culture, without electricity or running water, sometimes without an automobile.

I sold essays, a few short stories, a poem sometimes. I cared more about the life I lived than writing about it, but I wrote about it because I wanted to share it with people, to say, "Hey there's still magic in existence. Look at what we can do if we try."

I found more religion, the kind that says "Love everyone, animals, plants, the earth itself, the creator of all existence. There's beauty all around us. Let's find it, love it, and protect it."

After we left that ranch, I wrote a book about our time there. The way we lived called to something deep in people around us, in people who read my essays. I figured readers would buy a book about our experiences on the ranch. I put together a collection of essays, too, most of them previously published.

Several editors said they liked my books, but they didn't fit their list. I got tired of hearing that. I got to where I preferred impersonal rejection slips to, "We loved these, and they inspired every editor who read them," but no commitment to publish.

My fire burns down. I drain the coffee pot into my cup and set the pot away from the fire. I made the coffee strong and reheated it twice. It's powerful. I sip coffee between sentences. I sit my empty cup on the ground by the coffee pot. I add wood to my fire, and I write.

The night turns colder. I hold my notebook close to the fire. Flames cast light on the page. Flames keep my hands warm enough, I can write legibly. I shift often, right side close to the fire, then left side close to the fire, and turn around again.

The moon rises above the plain far down the mountain from me, hangs huge and golden above the horizon, then climbs the sky and turns smaller, sheds golden color, then glows white and cold. My horse and mule crop meadow grass in moonlight at the edge of dense forest where the steep ridge climbs toward the moon. Smell of grass drifts to me, smells of wild animals moving in the night.

Publishers rejected my books. I read it's hard to get books published now, when publishers treat literature like business and seek large profits and to hell with human and literary value. Maybe misery loves company, but knowing other authors had the same problem with unresponsive editors didn't put any

beans on my table nor enthusiasm into my pencil.

Before self-publishing came in big time, I decided to publish my own books by having a photo-copier in a shop in town copy and spiral bind them. I bought a new operating system for my computer and a new word processor, seeking broader formatting possibilities that would allow me to set up book manuscripts the way I needed for copying.

I know how a compulsive gambler feels. My next project completed would buy my way clear of poverty, would justify the financial risks I took.

My operating system and my word processor were defective, but I didn't know that. The people who wrote operator's manuals for the software were malevolent, mentally deficient, not educated enough, or all three. Tech-support people didn't know their products were defective or lied to me about it. I didn't know all that, and I thought I was just unusually stupid.

I did the work required for my half-time job taking care of a Girl Scout ranch. I liked that work and where we lived. When I wasn't working my job, I tried to make my computer work right, every day, for hours.

Sometimes I took breaks from trying to get my books into the form I wanted them in, and I worked on *In This House of Images*, that had been a 20 page short story and, through 18 revisions, grew into a 336 page novel about art, business, cannibalism in the modern world, about the loss of intuitive vision in the contemporary, rational, consumer society.

I revised essays and short stories. I put together two collections of short fiction and two more collections of essays and sent them to publishers. I tried to find a literary agent who would handle my work.

From almost every agent, I received a letter saying, you're close in your obvious talent and your writing ability but not quite there. Let the outfit we recommend, for a substantial fee, teach you how to rewrite these books so they'll sell to publishers. Then you'll write just like 423 other New York writers, all academically correct but without much to say. Recent college graduates paid \$6.00 an hour by a book-doctoring outfit will teach you.

My back, shoulders, and neck ached, hurt, cramped, from too much computer time, drove me wild with pain, but I couldn't stay away from the keyboard. My salvation lay in getting the words right, getting the books ready, attaining mastery of the machinery so it would do what I told it to do,

and I could put my words, perfected by hundreds of revisions, into the forms I needed.

Flu or a very heavy cold or some unidentified illness infested my bones with pain and stiffness. Snow blew past my windows at ten degrees below zero. Raven, black and shiny Raven, who watches me all year, flew between thickly-falling snowflakes, rode the wind on black wings outside my window and laughed raucously at my absurd human condition, trying to work at the keyboard while I coughed up ropy mucous and blew my nose until I thought I was blowing my brain into the soaked tissue paper accumulating by my desk in grocery sacks.

I no longer felt my fingers on the keyboard. I barely remembered what a word is. I lost all concept of sentences, paragraphs, stories, essays, books. I staggered to bed, shivered massively, covered up heavily, sweat, ached, hurt, dreamed crazy dreams of writing fulfilled, of wealth and good times, crazy dreams of poverty so abject I crawled, sick and starving, in filthy gutters while the world in splendor passed me by and laughed at my failure and my illness. I cried in agony.

Laura, home from her better job now that our children are grown and on their own, put water and food on the stand by the bed. She said, "I think you should go to a doctor."

"All doctors know is prescribe medicine. Every medicine I take almost kills me. I don't care anymore if I die, but I want to die on my own, not from some doctor selling poisons to kill me."

"You're not going to die. Sit up. Drink this water. Drink all of it. You need lots of fluids. Keep drinking water."

"Then I have to go to the bathroom more, and it's really hard for me to get there. I almost can't walk. I don't think I'm going to make it this time. I don't care. I don't want to keep going if I feel like this. Oh God, I hurt all over. I feel so sick. I want to live. No, I don't want to live anymore like this. I don't care if I die. I just want to get it over with. I want to live. I know things are going to get better. I don't care if I die. I have to go to the bathroom, and I can't even get there on my own."

Laura got hold of me under my armpits and pulled to help me get out of bed. I leaned on her. She helped me walk to the bathroom. She waited for me and helped me walk back and climb back into bed. She covered me up. She said, "You are going to get better. You're on your way to recovery." She sat on the bed beside me and talked soothingly to me. I no longer heard the words she said. I drifted into sleep.

She drove away to work. I leaned on the wall and walked to

the bathroom. I was so sick, I couldn't walk. I crawled to the bathroom, pulled myself up onto the toilet, and crawled back to bed. Days and nights passed. The storm blew itself out. Two feet of clean white snow covered the ground. The world smelled new and clean.

Sun shone in my bedroom window, soaked the floor, and warmed my room. I peeled off my top blanket, let it fall on the floor, then realized I had enough energy to do that. I cared if I was too warm or too cold. I slept a while, more comfortable than I could remember being. I woke again to sunshine. I sat up on the edge of the bed and ate fruit and cheese Laura had left for me.

I looked at chaos on my desk beside my bed. I might never be able to look a keyboard in the face again, this lifetime. Unfinished plans scattered on my desk. Somewhere in the depths of delirium and deep illness, I had found ideas that might ease the work I'd been doing. I had written many of them down. Parts of new ideas skidded and bounced in my waking mind.

I got out of bed. I opened windows to let cold air carry out lingering smells of illness. Naked, I turned on my computer. I should write more of my new ideas down, try to understand and organize those I had written down while I was sick. I looked through operator's manuals for computers, software, and hardware.

I picked up a manual, grey and ashes of rose. I couldn't remember seeing the spiral-bound book before, and yet it fit my hand in a more familiar way than any book I've ever held. I read my own name in the title, written in black and dark purple against a light grey cover. I opened the book.

My God. I sat down hard on the edge of my bed. I read again. I held my own operator's manual, my original operating instructions. I was astounded at what I'd found. I paged through. The book told what I was supposed to do and how, from the beginning of my life into eternity. Some of the book was random scribbling by a young and untutored hand, probably my own. A phrase leaped out at me and rang bells, alarm bells, bells of recognition, sudden bells of freedom, the phrase, "FREE LANCE RIDER."

I thought, "Oh my dear Lord in heaven, all these years of hard, hard work, bitter disappointment, poverty, and lack of recognition, and all of it, all all all of it was because I misunderstood from the beginning, quickly read, and in my typical haste to get on with the actual work and to hell with too

much explanation, set off full-speed ahead down the totally wrong path. How typical, how typical, or even, maybe I read correctly, but I set about, spoke aloud, and had repeated back to me by those who misheard, “free lance writer,” and in my absurd need to please everyone, I accepted their misunderstanding, their mishearing, as defining reality and changed my own concept of what I had heard, what I had read, what I had said, what I was going to do.

I shut the book and put it down. I climbed back into bed and lay there in warming sunshine. I thought, “My God. My God.”

I slept, and woke, thinking, “Why not?”

Chains fell away from me. I might float out the window and up into the mountain blue sky.

Laura said, “Give yourself more time before you make any decisions about the way you live, the way we live. You’re so excited, you’re hysterical. You still have a fever.”

“I’m not sick anymore. I’m more well and more sane than I’ve ever been. I know what I’m supposed to do. I am free.”

“We’re still in this together.”

“I know. But I don’t have any choice. I have to go the direction that’s right for me, for the first time ever. It’s getting late. I might not have much time to go in that direction if I don’t start now.”

“That’s what you always said about writing when it consumed time, energy, and money. It’s getting late. You got to do it now. I went with you all the way, even though I often thought there could be better ways to go, that didn’t keep us right on the edge of poverty.”

“I know.”

“This time, I’m not going with you. I have a good job now, and I can do better than living in poverty. I think you’d better think about what you’re doing and stay with me. This idea sounds really crazy.”

I did think about it. I still had to do what made sense. I served notice at my halftime job that provided a house, utilities, and a small wage. I’d been hanging on in desperation. It got harder and harder to do the work, because physical problems from old injuries given me by the drunk driver never totally healed, and I passed the age when it made sense to do physical labor.

I sold or gave away most of what I owned. I thought of keeping my guitar, but I sold it and bought a cheaper one so my heart wouldn’t break if outdoor weather and rough existence on a pack mule ruined it. I got enough from everything to buy a

good horse, a usable saddle, a mule for my packs and my basic equipment.

Laura looked at apartments in town. She said, "I can rent an apartment big enough for both of us, or I can rent one that works for me. It's time for you to make that decision."

"I have made that decision. I'm not going to live in town."

I thought she stepped springier. She hummed as she packed. We'd been through hard years together.

My operating manual got lost in the packing, or maybe Laura got rid of it when she was still trying to talk me out of what I had to do. It didn't matter. I knew what it said.

Now I'm on the mountain with my horse and my mule, and I like the change.

The only sad part is, it's modern times, and there isn't any more need for a freelance rider than there is for a misdirected freelance writer. I taught a two week class in horsemanship at the dude ranch across the highway, and that brought me a few bucks. I might have continued with that through the summer, but the manual didn't say free lance teacher. I joined in two round ups, and I helped drive cattle down from summer range, earned winter feed for my animals, a few beans, a few bucks.

I'm not in any better economic shape than I was before, and I'm still without anything set aside for the days when I can't work anymore. But I wake up every morning looking forward to the day, not filled with fear, even though I face winter in the mountains.

Fear of cold winter is a remnant of my pansy-assed freelance writer days. I'm a freelance rider now, and the world is outdoors. A rider endures what comes his way with gratitude for the beauty of stars on a below-zero night as well as gratitude for days of warm sunshine when cattle graze lazily in deep grass and the drover dozes astride his sleeping horse.

I named my horse "Images." His name connects me with my past, with directions wrongly taken. My horse's name serves as a reminder of different times and different perspectives. It brings that title, *In this House of Images*, to meaningful existence.

The sky shades grey along the eastern horizon with morning light. Sun sends orange light above the horizon to scout a way for its rising, then rises gloriously warm and brilliant and lights up heavy frost on the mountain with rainbow colors of refracted morning light. Morning smells cold and clean.

My horse and my mule snort and stomp among the frosted, sere meadow grasses. They want morning grain. I need fresh

coffee and breakfast of sourdough biscuits and sprouted beans.

I'm saddling Images when Eric rides through the drying high meadow grasses on the big paint he bought last year, pulls up by me and says, "Jambo sent me up, says, you want to clean out Dutch Meadows and on down into the canyon, push cattle down to the home ranch, there's a hundred dollar bill in it for you."

He reaches into his saddlebag and pulls out a white cellular phone. "He sent this up, said, you get a good gather ready to go, you call, he'll send me up, and I'll bring a couple dogs, keep the cattle from scattering back into the canyon on the way down the mountain."

The big paint, broad across the hindquarters for fast turns behind a high-tailing steer, gets bored, pretends he sees a rattlesnake close to his feet, rears, whinnies, dances on his hind feet, and tries to stampede off the mountain, but Eric don't believe in horse imagination, reins him down and around and walks him stepping tiny sidesteps, back beside me.

"Jambo says anytime you want, come down to the ranch. That old bunkhouse is pretty warm. Nobody uses it. Got a stove. You help feed cattle, he'll give you firewood, food, a few bucks. Year I moved up here, seven years ago, it dropped off 36 below zero second week in January, stayed there two weeks every night, climbed to zero on sunny days. That old bunkhouse beats freezin' to death. Jambo says I should bring your mule and pack down if you want, leave you freer to herd cows."

I hand him the mule's lead rope.

Horse imagination is contagious. Images decides he sees the same snake Eric's paint imagined, rears, snorts, paws the air. I snap his head down with the reins, just hard enough to remind him while I'm on the ground in front of him isn't a good time to start acting out wild horse dreams. I say, "Images."

Eric leans on his saddle horn. He says, "I been wanting to ask you, how you come to name a horse Images?" I walk around Images, check the blanket, check the headstall, and pull the stirrups down ready to mount. Eric gets uncomfortable with the time going by, nobody saying nothin', so he says, "You mind if I ask?"

I say, "Don't mind. Go ahead and ask." I run my hand under the cinch.

Images blows into mountain sunshine. He's ready to go, wants to work this warming, clear day, always wants to work. I lift my left foot into the stirrup, grab the horn, and pull myself up, settle deep in the deep western saddle, check my rope and

rifle scabbard.

I look into my Eric's flat blue eyes. He's young. He's a good man, going to be a hell of a good cowboy if the modern world of rich consumers and modern machines don't jerk him out onto the freeways and into the cities and make him leave this mountain cowboy life behind.

I spit into deep dust, smelling of granite dust and dried-out, hoof-chopped horse manure, and I say, "No way to tell you sixty years history in the brief time we got before them maverick cows hit the head of the draw headed for high country. You think I ought to ride, or you think I ought to yarn yarns in sunshine?"

I touch rein to Images' neck. He knows what I'm ready for without my heel digging into ribs, without no leather snapped. He rears high onto his hind feet, dances about five steps while he taps the higher air in a light tattoo with his front hooves. I stand forward in the stirrups, my greying head as tall toward dark granite bluffs rising close above us as his roan and white head. He comes down onto his front hooves, spins like a cat in the deep dust, me with him, riding deep into the saddle, easy on reins because he knows what to do.

He leaps into a gallop around granite stones too big to jump, leans toward the ground left, comes up straight and fast. We gallop past pine grass, juniper brush, toward the head of the canyon, where maverick cows move in the early morning, where rustlers, rattlesnakes, bears, cougars live in the mountains in the new day's sunshine, where adventures wait for me like the suddenness of new morning sunshine.