PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

Revision

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"Talent is a long patience," Anton Chekhov remarked, an acknowledgment that the creative process is not all inventive, and extends far beyond the first heated rush. Partly corrective, critical, nutritive, and fostering, revision is a matter of rendering a story the best that it can be. William C. Knott, in The Craft of Fiction, cogently observes that "anyone can write—and almost everyone you meet these days is writing. However, only the writers know how to rewrite. It is this ability alone that turns the amateur into a pro."

While the focus of this chapter is the overall revision of stories and the best use of readers' feedback, the methods of shaping, enriching, and enlivening stories discussed throughout this book implicitly concern the revision of fiction, element by element. We have already visited the process of revision through the discussion of the story workshop in the preface (a discussion that will continue here); in the Chapter 4 review "Character: A Summary"; and in the Chapter 6 section "Revising Summary and Scene."

Re-Vision

Revising is a process more dreaded than dreadful. The resistance to rewriting is, if anything, greater than the resistance to beginning in the first place. Yet the chances are that once you have committed yourself to a first draft, you'll be unable to leave it in an unfinished and unsatisfying state. You'll be unhappy until it's right. Making it right will involve a second commitment, to seeing the story fresh and creating it again with the advantage of this "re-visions." Alice Munro, in the introduction to her Selected Stories, describes the risk, the readiness, and the reward.

... The story, in the first draft, has put on rough but adequate clothes, it is "finished" and might be thought to need no more than a lot of technical adjustments, some tightening here and expanding there, and the slipping in of some telling dialogue and chopping away of flabby modifiers. It's then, in fact, that the story is in the greatest danger of losing its life, of appearing so hopelessly misbegotten that my only relief comes from abandoning it. It doesn't do enough. It does what I intended, but it turns out that my intention was all wrong.... I go around glum and preoccupied, trying to think of ways to fix the problem. Usually the right way pops up in the middle of this.


Except that it isn't the right way. Maybe a way to the right way. Now I write pages and pages I'll have to discard. New angles are introduced, minor characters brought center stage, lively and satisfying scenes are written, and it's all a mistake. Out they go. But by this time I'm on the track, there's no backing out. I know so much more than I did, I know what I want to happen and where I want to end up and I just have to keep trying till I find the best way of getting there.

To find the best way of getting there, you may have to "see again" more than once. The process of revision involves external and internal insight. You'll need your conscious critic, your creative instinct, and readers you trust. You may need each of them several times, not necessarily in that order. A story gets better not just by polishing and refurbishing, not by improving a word choice here and an image there, but by taking risks with the structure, re-envisioning, being open to new meaning itself. "In the first draft is the talent," said French poet Paul Valéry, "in the second is the art."
Worry It and Walk Away

To write your first draft, you banished the internal critic. Now make the critic welcome. Revision is work, but the strange thing is that you may find you can concentrate on the work for much longer than you could play at freewriting. It has occurred to me that writing a first draft is very like tennis or softball—I have to be psyched for it. Every level up, alert, on my toes. A few hours is all I can manage, and at the end of it I'm wiped out. Revision is like careful carpentry, and if I'm under a deadline or just determined to get this thing crafted and polished, I can go for twelve hours of it.

The first round of rewrites is probably a matter of letting your misgivings surface. Focus on what seems awkward, overlong, undeveloped, flat, or flowery. Tinker. Tighten. Sharpen. More important at this stage than finishing any given page or phrase is that you're getting to know your story in order to open it to new possibilities. You will also get tired of it; you may feel stuck.

Then put it away. Don't look at it for a matter of days or weeks—until you feel fresh on the project. In addition to getting some distance on your story, you're mailing it to your unconscious, not consciously working out the flaws but temporarily letting them go. Rollo May, in The Courage to Create, describes what frequently happens next:

Everyone uses from time to time such expressions as, "a thought pops up;" an idea comes "from the blue" or "dawns;" or "comes as though out of a dream," or "it suddenly hit me." These are various ways of describing a common experience: the breakthrough of ideas from some depth below the level of awareness.

It is my experience that such realizations occur over and over again in the course of writing a short story or novel. Often I will believe that because I know who my characters are and what happens to them, I know what my story is about—and often I find I'm wrong, or that my understanding is shallow or incomplete.

In the first draft of one novel, for instance, I opened with the sentence, "It took a hundred and twelve bottles of champagne to see the young Poindexter off to Arizona." A page later one character whispered to another that the young Mr. Poindexter in question had "consumption." I worked on this book for a year (taking my characters off to Arizona where they dealt with the desert heat, lack of water, alcoholism, loss of religion, and the development of mining interests and the building trade) before I saw the connection between "consumption" and "champagne." When I understood that simple link, I understood the overarching theme—surely latent in the idea from the moment it had taken hold of me—between tuberculosis, spiritual thirst, consumerism, and addiction, all issues of "consumption."

"...The first impulse in writing is to flood it out, let as much run freely as you possibly can. Then to take a walk or go to the bank...and come back in a day or six months later. To read it with a cold eye and say, "This is good. This is not. That sentence works. This is magical. This is crummy." You have to maintain your critical sensibility and not just assume, because it was an extraordinary dream for you, that it will be a dream for other people. Because people need maps to your dreams."

ALAN GURGANUS

It might seem dismaying that you should see what your story is about only after you have written it. Try it; you'll like it. Nothing is more exhilarating than the discovery that a complex pattern has lain in your mind ready to unfold.

Note that in the early stages of revision, both the worrying and the walking away are necessary. Perhaps it is bafflement itself that plunges us to the unconscious space where the answer lies.

Criticism and the Story Workshop

Once you have thought your story through, drafted it, and worked on it to the best of your ability, someone else's eyes can help to refresh the vision of your own. Wise professionals rely on the help of an agent or editor at this juncture (although even the wisest will still smart at censure); anyone can rely on the help of friends, family, or classmates in a story workshop. The trick to making good use of criticism is to be utterly selfish about it. Be greedy for it. Take it all in. Ultimately you are the laborer, the arbiter, and the boss in any dispute about your story, so you can afford to consider any problem and any solution. Most of us feel not only committed to what we have put on the page, but also defensive on its behalf—wanting, really, to be told only that it is a work of genius or, failing that, to find out that we have gotten away with it. Therefore, the first exigency of revision is that you learn to hear, absorb, and accept criticism.

"Revising is like cutting your own hair," says novelist Robert Stone, for while you may sense the need for improvement, it's hard to get right what you can never entirely see for yourself. This is the major advantage of a workshop—your fellow writers may not be able to tell you how to style the material in the way that best suits the story, but they can at least hold up the mirror and see from a more distanced perspective. (If you are just beginning the practice of group critiques, you may wish to look back at the description of common workshop procedures in Chapter 1.)
How can you assimilate so many opinions, let alone choose what is useful? First, give special consideration to the comments of those two or three workshop members with whose responses you have generally agreed before. However, the best— or at any rate the most useful—criticism, John L'Heureux suggests, simply points out what you had already sensed for yourself but had hoped to get away with. Or as Flannery O'Connor put it, with typical bluntness, in fiction "you can do anything you can get away with, but nobody has ever gotten away with much."

It used to be popular to speak of "constructive criticism" and "detractive criticism," but these are misleading terms suggesting that positive suggestions are useful and negative criticism useless. In practice the opposite is usually the case. You're likely to find that the most constructive thing a reader can do is say I don't believe this, I don't like this, I don't understand this, pointing to precisely the passages that made you uneasy. This kind of laying-the-finger-on-the-trouble-spot produces an inward groan, but it's also satisfying; you know just where to go to work. Often the most destructive thing a reader can do is offer you a positive suggestion—Why don't you have him crash the car?—that is irrelevant to your vision of the story. Be suspicious of praise that is too extravagant, of blame that is too general. If your impulse is to defend the story or yourself, still the impulse. Behave as if bad advice were good advice, and give it serious consideration. You can reject it after you have explored it for anything of use it may offer.

THE WRITING WORKSHOP FINALLY IS THE ONE PLACE where you can be sure you and your work are taken seriously, where your writing intentions are honored, where even in a mean-spirited comment you can divine— if you wish—the truth about your writing, its strengths and its weaknesses. It is a place where you are surrounded by people whose chief interest is also yours, where the talk is never anything but writing and writing well and writing better.... It is where you somehow pick up the notion that what you're doing is a good and noble thing, and though you may not write as well as you'd like, it is enough and will suffice.

JOHN L'HEUREUX

Workshop members often voice sharply divided responses to a manuscript, a situation that may confuse and frustrate the author. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill editor Duncan Murrell advises workshop writers to pay close attention to the parts of their work that make readers stumble, but to disregard most of the solutions those readers suggest. Give a flawed story to ten good readers and they'll accurately find the flawed passages before offering ten wildly varying explanations and a handful of contradictory solutions. Good readers have a gut level understanding that something is wrong in a story, but they're often unclear about what it is, or what to do about it. Yet once pointed to the weak sections, authors almost always come up with better solutions than anything a reader or an editor can offer; they know the story and the characters better. The trick is to bite your lip when readers tell you how to fix your story, while noting the passages that need repair.

Indeed, while the author may or may not benefit from peer suggestions, everyone else in the workshop does because the practice of thinking through and articulating responses to a story's challenges eventually makes all participants more objective critics of their own work. You will notice that the more specific the criticism you offer—or receive—the more useful it proves and the less it stings; similarly, the more specific the praise of "what works," the more likely it is to reinforce good habits—and to be believed. After a semester's experience of workshop, you'll find that you can critique a story within your own imagination, knowing who would say what, with whom you would agree, and telling yourself what you already know to be true.

Within a day or two of the workshop, novelist, playwright, and teacher Michelle Carter advises that the author try to "rehear criticism," that is, to assess what it is readers are responding to, which may not be apparent from the suggested "fix." For example, if a number of readers suggest changing the story's point of view from third person to first, Carter might reinterpret that to mean that the narrator seems overly remote from the characters—not that first-person narration is literally a better choice, but that readers want a more immediate experience of the main character's emotional dilemma.

A second example would be wanting "to know more about Character X." This doesn't necessarily mean sprinkling on some facts and history; but rather that the reader may want a greater understanding of the character's motivations or a closer rendering of crucial moments.

Additionally, Carter cautions, be tough with yourself, even when you realize that criticism is based on a misreading. Rarely is misinterpretation solely the mistake of the reader: Ask what awkwardness of writing or false emphasis might have led to that skewed reading. Novelist Wally Lamb reinforces this point: "Often I think we let the writer get away with too much. If the writing is unclear, we'll read it a second time and make it clear to ourselves and then let the writer off the hook, when, in fact, the writing has to stand for itself.... You want to work on the writing until it is good enough that the writer doesn't have to be in the room explaining and interpreting."
Kenneth Atchity, in *A Writer's Time*, advises compulsory "vacations" at crucial points in the revising process, in order to let the criticism cook until you feel ready, impatient, to get back to writing. So once again, walk away, and when you feel that you have acquired enough distance from the story to see it anew, go back to work. Make notes of your plans, large and small. Talk to yourself in your journal about what you want to accomplish and where you think you have failed. Let your imagination play with new images or passages of dialogue. Always keep a copy (and/or a document on disk) of the story as it is so that you can go back to the original, and then be ruthless with another copy. Eudora Welty advised cutting sections apart and pinning them back together so that they can be easily rearranged. I like to use the whole surface of the kitchen table as a cut-and-paste board. Some people keep the story in their heads and do their rearranging directly onto the computer screen—which in any case has made the putting-back-together process less tedious than retyping.

**Asking the Big Question: What Have I Written?**

In a piece of literary criticism, your goal is to say as clearly and directly as possible what you mean. In fiction, your goal is to make people and make them do things and, ideally, never to "say what you mean" at all. Theoretically, an outline can never harm a paper for a literature class: This is what I have to say, and I'll say it through points A, B, and C. But if a writer sets out to write a story to illustrate an idea, the fiction will almost inevitably be thin. Even if you begin with an outline, as many writers do, it will be an outline of the action and not of your "points." You may not know the meaning of the story until the characters begin to tell you what it is. You'll begin with an image of a person or a situation that seems vaguely to embody something important, and you'll learn as you go what that something is. Likewise, what you mean will emerge in the reading experience and take place in the reader's mind, "not," as the narrator says of Marlow's tales in *Heart of Darkness*, "inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out."

Early on in the revision process, you may find yourself impelled by, under pressure of, or interested primarily in your theme. It will seem that you have set yourself this lonely, austere, and torturous task because you do have something to say. Therefore, attempting to articulate the theme of your story is something you'll want to do when you're preparing to revise, so as to direct your revision work toward exploring your understanding of the theme.

At this point you will, and you should, begin to let the sorting-comparing-cataloging neocortex of your brain go to work on the stuff of your story. Rather than "putting in a theme," you'll be looking back to see what you've already, mostly subconsciously, been doing all along. John Gardner describes the process in *The Art of Fiction.*

Theme, it should be noticed, is not imposed on the story but evolved from within it—initially an intuitive but finally an intellectual act on the part of the writer. The writer muses on the story idea to determine what it is in it that has attracted him, why it seems to him worth telling. Having determined what interests him—and what chiefly concerns the major character... he toys with various ways of telling his story, thinks about what has been said before about [his theme], broods on every image that occurs to him, turning it over and over, puzzling it, hunting for connections, trying to figure out—before he writes, while he writes, and in the process of repeated revisions—what it is he really thinks... Only when he thinks about a story in this way does he achieve not just an alternative reality or, loosely, an imitation of nature, but true, firm art—fiction as serious thought.

So, theme is what your story is about. But that is not enough, because a story may be "about" a dying Samurai or a quarreling couple or two kids on a train, and those would not be the themes of those stories. A story is also about an abstraction, and if the story is significant, that abstraction may be very large; yet thousands of stories are about love, other thousands about death, and still other thousands about both love and death, and to say this is to say little about the theme of any of them.

We might better understand theme if we ask questions like: What does the story have to say about the idea or abstraction that seems to be contained in it? What attitudes or judgments does it imply? Above all, how do the elements of fiction contribute to our experience of those ideas and attitudes in the story?

**How Fictional Elements Contribute to Theme**

Whatever the idea and attitudes that underlie the theme of a story, that story will bring them into the realm of experience through its particular and unique pattern. Theme involves emotion, logic, and judgment, all three—but the pattern that forms the particular experience of that theme is made up of every element of fiction this book has discussed: the arrangement, shape, and flow of the action, as performed by the characters, realized in their details, seen in their atmosphere, from a unique point of view, through the imagery and the rhythm of the language.

This book, for example, contains at least eight stories that may be said to have what used to be called "the generation gap" as a major theme: "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Big Me," "A Visit of Charity," "Tierra, 1980," "My Kid's Dog," "Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter," "Following the Notes," and "Who's Irish?" Some of these are written from the point of view of a member of the older generation, some from the point of view of the younger. In some, conflict is resolved by bridging the gap; in others, it is not. The characters are variously poor, middle class, rural, urban, male, female, adolescent, middle-aged, old,
Asian, Indian, white. The imagery variously evokes food, landscape, religion, music, cars, dogs, sex, child abuse, and death. It is in the different uses of the elements of fiction that each story makes unique what it has to say about, and what attitude it takes toward, the idea of "the generation gap."

The process of discovering the theme of your story—worrying until its theme reveals itself, connections occur, images recur, a pattern emerges—is more conscious than readers know, beginning writers want to accept, or established writers are willing to admit. It has become a popular—cliché—stance for writers to claim that they haven't the faintest idea what they meant in their writing. Don't ask me; read the book. If I knew what it meant, I wouldn't have written it. It means what it says. When an author makes such a response, it is well to remember that an author is a professional liar. What he or she means is not that there are no themes, ideas, or meanings in the work but that these are not separable from the pattern of fictional experience in which they are embodied. It also means that, having done the difficult writerly job, the writer is now unwilling also to do the critic's work. But beginning critics also resist. Students irritated by the analysis of literature often ask, "How do you know she did that on purpose? How do you know it didn't just happen to come out that way?" The answer is that you don't. But what is on the page is on the page. An author no less than a reader or critic can see an emerging pattern, and the author has both the possibility and the obligation of manipulating it. When you have put something on the page, you have two possibilities, and only two: You may cut it out or you are committed to it. Gail Godwin asks:

But what about the other truths you lost by telling it that way?

Ah, my friend, this is my question too. The choice is always a killing one. One option must die so that another may live. I do little murders in my workroom every day.

In the unified pattern of a fiction there is something to which the name of "magic" may be given, where one empty word is placed upon another and tapped with a third, and a flaming scar or a long-eared hope is pulled out of the tall black heart. The most magical thing about this magic is that once the trick is explained, it is not explained, and the better you understand how it works, the better it will work again.

Finally, through revision, through deciding what to cut and what to commit to, you will, or at least might, arrive at a story that is of a piece, a story that is organic, a story that cannot be reduced to theme, but that embodies one.

Revision Questions

As you plan the revision and as you rewrite, you will know (and your critics will tell you) what problems are unique to your story. There are also general, almost universal, pitfalls that you can avoid if you ask yourself the following questions:

Is there unnecessary summary? Remember that it is a common impulse to try to cover too much ground. Tell your story in the fewest possible scenes; cut down on summary and unnecessary flashback. These dissipate energy and lead you to tell rather than show.

Why should the reader turn from the first page to the second? Is the language fresh? Are the characters alive? Does the first sentence, paragraph, page introduce real tension? If it doesn't, you have probably begun at the wrong place. If you are unable to find a way to introduce tension on the first page, you may have to question whether you have a story after all.

Is it original? Almost every writer thinks first, in some way or other, of the familiar, the usual, the given. This character is a stereotype, that emotion is too easy, that phrase is a cliché. First-draft laziness is inevitable, but it is also a way of being dishonest. A good writer will comb the work for clichés and labor to find the exact, the honest, and the fresh.

Is it clear? Although ambiguity and mystery provide some of our most profound pleasures in literature, beginning writers are often unable to distinguish between mystery and muddle, ambiguity and sloppiness. You may want your character to be rich with contradiction, but we still want to know whether that character is male or female, black or white, old or young. We need to be oriented on the simplest level of reality before we can share your imaginative world. Where are we? When are we? Who are they? How do things look? What time of day or night is it? What's the weather? What's happening?

Is it self-conscious? Probably the most famous piece of advice to the rewrite is William Faulkner's "kill all your darlings." When you are carried away with the purple of your prose, the music of your alliteration, the hilarity of your wit, the profundity of your insights, then the chances are that you are having a better time writing than the reader will have reading. No reader will forgive you, and no reader should. Just tell the story. The style will follow of itself if you just tell the story.

Where is it too long? Most of us, and even the best of us, write too long. We are so anxious to explain every nuance, cover every possible aspect of character, action, and setting that we forget the necessity of stringent selection. In fiction, and especially in the short story, we want sharpness, economy, and vivid, telling detail. More than necessary is too much. I have been helped in my own tendency to tell all by a friend who went through a copy of one of my novels, drawing a line through the last sentence of about every third paragraph. Then in the margin he wrote, again and again, "Hit it, and get out." That's good advice for anyone.

Where is it underdeveloped in character, action, imagery, theme? In any first, second, or third draft of a manuscript there are likely to be necessary passages sketched, skipped, or skeletal. What information is missing, what actions are incomplete, what motives obscure, what images inexact? Where
does the action occur too abruptly so that it loses its emotional force? Is the crisis presented as a scene?

Where is it too general? Originality, economy, and clarity can all be achieved through the judicious use of significant detail. Learn to spot general, vague, and fuzzy terms. Be suspicious of yourself anytime you see nouns like someone and everything, adjectives like huge and handsome, adverbs like very and really. Seek instead a particular thing, a particular size, an exact degree.

Although the idea of “starting over” is a real and understandable one, the chances are that the rewards of revising will startlingly outweigh the pains. Sometimes a character who is dead on the page will come to life through the addition of a few sentences or significant details. Sometimes a turgid or tedious paragraph can become sharp with a few judicious cuts. Sometimes dropping page one and putting page seven as page three used to be can provide the skeleton of an otherwise limp story. And sometimes, often, perhaps always, the difference between an amateur rough cut and a publishable story is in the struggle at the rewriting stage.

Further Suggestions for Revision

- If you have been writing your story on a computer, retype at least one full draft, making both planned and spontaneous changes as you go. The computer’s abilities can tempt us to a “fix-it” approach to revision, but jumping in and out of the text to correct problems can result in a revision that reads like patchwork. Rather, the effect of even small changes should ripple through the story, and this is more likely to happen if the writer re-reads the story as a whole by literally rewriting it from start to finish.

- Screenwriter Stephen Fischer emphasizes that “writing is not a monolithic process, just as cooking is not a monolithic process. You don’t just go in the kitchen and cook—you do a number of very specific things that you focus on one at a time—you peel garlic, you dice garlic, you sauté onions—these are separate processes. You don’t go into a kitchen and flap your arms and just cook—and in the same way, you don’t just write.”

To put this analogy into practice, write two or three revisions of a story draft, focusing on a different issue each time. For example, you might zero in on the motivations of a character whose behavior and dialogue don’t yet ring true; or you might simply focus on using setting to reflect emotion or threading physical activity through dialogue scenes. Focusing on a single goal lets you concentrate your efforts—yet other developments will naturally occur in response to the single-focus changes.

- In an interview in Conversations on Writing Fiction, novelist and teacher Jane Smiley says she asks her student writers to confront their own sets of “evasions,” the counterproductive “rituals which don’t actually allow them to spend time with or become engaged with their chosen themes or characters.” For example, many people find conflict hard to handle in real life and therefore avoid it, often for good reason. Yet many of us sidestep conflict in our fiction too, even knowing its necessity in driving a character toward a defining crisis. If this sounds like an evasion you’ve experienced, take a look back at places in the story where explosive scenes should happen—places where characters ought to confront or defend. Are these, in fact, all-out scenes? Do your characters neatly sidestep the conflict and retreat to their private thoughts? Does another character too conveniently knock at the door?

...you generally start out with some overall idea that you can see fairly clearly, as if you were standing on a dock and looking at a ship on the ocean. At first you can see the entire ship, but then as you begin work you’re in the boiler room and you can’t see the ship anymore.... What you really want in an editor is someone who’s still on the dock, who can say, Hi, I’m looking at your ship, and it’s missing a bow, the front mast is crooked, and it looks to me as if your propellers are going to have to be fixed.

MICHAEL CRICHTON

Examples of the Revision Process

When reading a polished, published story, it can be difficult to imagine that it once was any other way—difficult to realize that the author made both choices and unplanned connections, difficult to envision the story’s history. After all, by the point of publication the writer has likely heeded critic Annie Dillard’s admonition: “Process is nothing; erase your tracks. The path is not the work.”

Yet a glimpse of these earlier “tracks” may reveal the paths writers forged to final versions of their stories, and this may in turn inspire you in your own
thorough reenvisioning of your own work. What follows are authors’ accounts of the revision process.

In her book-length essay The Writing Life, Annie Dillard uses the metaphor of knocking out “a bearing wall” for the revising writer’s sacrifice of the very aspect of the story that inspired its writing. Strange as it sounds, this is an experience familiar to many accomplished writers: “The part you must jettison,” says Dillard, “is not only the best-written part; it is also, oddly, that part which was to have been the very point. It is the original key passage, the passage on which the test was to hang, and from which you yourself drew the courage to begin.”

Joyce Carol Oates describes this phenomenon—and more—in her essay “Smooth Talk: Short Story into Film.” Readers of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” one of the most famous American stories of the late twentieth century, may be surprised to learn that the author’s initial impulse to write the story disappeared in the drafting process. Recounts Oates:

Some years ago in the American Southwest, there surfaced a tabloid psychopath known as “The Pied Piper of Tucson.” I have forgotten his name, but his specialty was the seduction and occasional murder of teenage girls. He may or may not have had actual accomplices, but his bizarre activities were known among a circle of teenagers in the Tucson area; for some reason they kept his secret, deliberately did not inform parents or police. It was this fact, not the fact of the mass murderer himself, that struck me at the time. And this was a pre-Manson time, early or mid-1960s.

The Pied Piper mimicked teenagers in their talk, dress, and behavior, but he was not a teenager—he was a man in his early thirties. Rather short, he stuffed rags in his leather boots to give himself height. (And sometimes walked unsteadily as a consequence: did none among his admirers recognize notice?) He charmed his victims as charismatic psychopaths have always charmed their victims, to the bewilderment of others who fancy themselves free of all lunatic attractions. The Pied Piper of Tucson: a trashy dream, a tabloid archetype, shear article, comedy, cartoon—surrounded, however improbably, and finally tragically, by real people. You think that, if you look twice, he won’t be there. But there he is.

I don’t remember any longer where I first read about this Pied Piper—very likely in Life Magazine. I do recall deliberately not reading the full article because I didn’t want to be distracted by too much detail. It was not after all the mass murderer himself who intrigued me, but the disturbing fact that a number of teenagers—from “good” families—aided and abetted his crimes. This is the sort of thing authorities and responsible citizens invariably call “inexplicable” because they can’t find explanations for it. They would not have fallen under this manic’s spell, after all.

An early draft of my short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”—from which the film Smooth Talk was adapted by Joyce Choppin and Tom Cole—had the rather too explicit title “Death and the Maiden.” It was cast in a mode of fiction to which I am still partial—indeed, every third or fourth story of mine is probably in this mode—realistic allegory, it might be called. It is Hawthornean, romantic, shading into parable. Like the medieval German engraving from which my title was taken, the story was minutely detailed yet clearly an allegory of the fatal attractions of death (or the devil). An innocent young girl is seduced by her own vanity; she mistakes death for erotic romance of a particularly American/trashy sort.

In subsequent drafts the story changed its tone, its focus, its language, its title. It became “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Written at a time when the author was intrigued by the music of Bob Dylan, particularly the hauntingly elegiac song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue,” it was dedicated to Bob Dylan. The charismatic mass murderer drops into the background and his innocent victim, a fifteen-year-old, moves into the foreground. She becomes the true protagonist of the tale, courting and being courted by her fate, a self-styled 1950s pop figure, alternately absurd and winning. There is no suggestion in the published story that “Arnold Friend” has seduced and murdered other young girls, or even that he necessarily intends to murder Connie. Is his interest merely sexual? (Nor is there anything about the complicity of other teenagers. I saved that yet more provocative note for a current story, “Testimony.”) Connie is shallow, vain, silly, hopeful, doomed—but capable nonetheless of an unexpected gesture of heroism at the story’s end.

Annie Dillard concludes the section of her essay “The Writing Life” by suggesting that a writer may save the abandoned idea for another story. “So it is that a writer writes many books. In each book, he intended several urgent and vivid points, many of which he sacrificed as the book’s form hardened... The writer returns to these materials, these passionate subjects, as to unfinished business, for they are his life’s work.”

What follows are an essay by author Ron Carlson on the writing of his story “Keith” an early draft of the story, and the story as it finally appeared.

Notes on “Keith”
RON CARLSON

The first signal from the real world for the story “Keith”: I saw a woman in the hospital. I was in the University of Utah Hospital visiting a friend, and walking along the fifth floor corridor, the glassed part which offers a view of the whole valley below, I passed a young woman who