

NaNoWriMo and the New American Man
or
Satisfaction; fulfillment; the long land between
by
Walter Holland

John Gardner's *On Becoming A Novelist* is one of the better books of its kind: a memoir and practical handbook for novelist-aspirants, which details in brutally frank language the requirements - in terms of craft, temperament, lifestyle, reading practice, and above all moral seriousness - for making a life out of writing long fiction. Gardner was a master stylist and well-regarded teacher, and the book is as rich and readable as his fiction. It belongs on the shelf with other classics of the genre, like Ann Lamott's *Bird By Bird* (which with its offbeat NoCal spirituality and 'write your childhood' exhortations is a little motherly, a little Crazy Aunt-y) and Steven King's recent *On Writing* (not his best work, but engaging and inspiring, swiftly written, once again showing King to be a talented memoirist and one of our master chroniclers of American *youth*), but Gardner's book is the toughest of the three, as prose and as advice. For Gardner, writing is revising - the interrogative, sacrificial process by which we craft the 'vivid and continuous dream' that is the purpose of fiction, by jettisoning most of our undisciplined first impulses. (Lamott agrees in part, titling her most useful and pragmatic chapter 'Shitty First Drafts', though her conception of fiction's ultimate purpose is less Puritan than Gardner's. King has a wholly different attitude toward revision. And who can argue with those sales figures?)

Gardner puts it bluntly: not everyone should bother writing. Of those who can string sentences together, few have the sense of craft to complete short stories; of that group, few are qualified to take up the work of long-form fiction, and even then, very few good novels exist. Which is to say, few can hack it as novelists, and even fewer should *bother*.

John Gardner is one of our more intriguing post-WWII writers of fiction, and he wrote a hell of a lot of good published fiction in his lifetime, including at least one novel (*Grendel*) that can be called a classic. In other words, he's in a pretty good position to talk about the craft of writing and what it takes to engage professionally in that sacred work - the monasticism, the minutiae, the daily grappling with the weight of our shared literary inheritance.

Chris Baty has also written a book about becoming a novelist. It's called *No Plot? No Problem!* And as far as he's concerned, if you have thirty days to spare, you can and should and by gum you *definitely will* finish your novel. He wants you to do it in November, this November ideally (why wait?); you can do it in your spare time, two or three hours a day. Less, if you type fast. Baty is the founder of a little event called National Novel Writing Month - NaNoWriMo, to the 59,000 people who took part this year - and it starts in a few weeks. He'll even give you a sticker, just for showing up. Chris Baty is a new American man.

I lost last year - only made it to 35,000 words before stopping during Thanksgiving

break, roughly 100 pages in three weeks. But this year I'm a little better prepared: by November 1, 2006 I'll actually have a plot. I keep my sticker in my little notebook where no one but me can see it.

I'm not a novelist. Barely even a 'NaNovelist,' really. And to quote Eddie Vedder:

Oh, but do I deserve to be?
Is that the question?
And if so, who answers? Who answers?

NaNoWriMo is very much a dot-com era creation; it's basically a website, a message board, and an optional-donation revenue model. (The NaNoWriMo group is a nonprofit organization; proceeds go to build libraries in Laos.) The program is simple: sign up; receive some inspiring weekly emails from Baty; correspond via the message board with your fellow NaNovelists about *Help me come up with a good backstory for this supporting character* or *What should I name my half-Elven princess?* or *When does the sun set in Zurich in late spring?* and so forth. And then, for the 30 days of November, write an average of 1,667 words per day - five or six manuscript pages, in other words, a slower pace than Stephen King but not by much - to reach the big 50K on 11/30. Participants get little inspiration images to put on their websites (same design as the sticker); 'winners,' those who submit 50,000 words for an official count by midnight on the last day, are given the same images, but in green. Submissions are immediately deleted after the count; all copyrights and whatnot stay with the writers.

My 2005 novel was going to be - actually what conjugation should I use there? 'Was to have been'? 'Is'? 'Will be'? 'Could be'? 'Is, in its incomplete first draft form'? Metaphysical limbo! Anyhow, it is/was about a guy on a bus trip to bury his second parent, who gets stranded en route in a small town much like his hometown, during a three-day Festival where people switch bodies and lives. By the time I stopped writing, the lead character had had 30,000 words of portentous conversation indirectly about his parents, my (excuse me, *his*) ex-girlfriend had given a barely-coherent speech, and several paragraphs of impressionistic (read: garbled) prose had intermittently popped up and fizzled out. Right around the hundredth page there's a paragraph in which I manage to get out of my way and tell a human story. That's a long way to go for not much punchline. And then it's back to the solipsism.

My incomplete NaNovel is/was probably about average: a mess.

Comic book writer/artist Dave Sim - creator of the 300-issue self-published *Cerebus*, quite possibly the single greatest achievement in the medium of comics, whose *Cerebus Guide to Self-Publishing Comics* is as good as the books mentioned above - says every comic artist has 2,000 bad pages inside her, and simply has to crank them out in terribly anonymity before being able to do lasting professional work. (As Sim slyly puts it: don't waste time asking me what I think of your early stuff. Just draw. Feel free to show me page 2,001, but at that point my opinion will be the last thing on your mind.) In other words, Sim has the same attitude about first drafts as he does about sexuality - a topic on which he's considerably less readable and sensible: *Eww. That stuff should be private.*

A casual perusal of the NaNo online forums reveals a decidedly un-Simian view of the creative process. Each year the growing crowd of thousands of NaNovelists produces the largest simultaneous outpouring of terrible literature in the history of mankind, a glut of words so stupefyingly bad - *almost uniformly so* - that by sheer contrast it manages to reaffirm the miracle of great literature even as it perceptibly cheapens that miracle, unintentionally parodies it. The mutual reaffirmation society that is the NaNo user base is a bit like the Cancer Survivors group in the book and film *Fight Club*: it's so moving to see people in emotional and physical extremity sharing their most closely-guarded feelings, baring their intimate fantasies and risking their conceptions of themselves, that you're almost willing to overlook the fact that what's said is mostly maudlin self-help cliché bullshit. The commitment to 'just getting by' precludes really living well.

And yet it's good that such a group is in the world, good that the work of soul-sharing and community-building is taken up by men and women in service of personal creative impulses.

Right?

The most popular of the NaNo forums, by a huge margin, is the Fantasy discussion area. It's probably the most specialized of the forums in terms of generic demands - and I want you to know by the way that I'm using 'forums' instead of 'fora' because of how ridiculous the latter looks on the page - the most specialized, and consequently both the least interesting-in-itself (because of shared affinities taken for granted by the participants) and the most fascinating-as-sociology. The writers in the Fantasy forum are hardcore fans of fantasy fiction as such (whereas, for instance, almost no one could claim to be a 'fan' of literary fiction), and it is in their excited, guileless, absorbing, often totally asinine discussions of their work that the nature of the NaNo experience shines through most clearly. American literature doesn't live here, but *something* does, a curious groundswell of energy and creativity, and its relationship to millennia of literary tradition says something about our time and its art - and those to come.

For one thing, the fantasy writers seem to be the younger NaNo crowd. The prose style in the forum sometimes swerves toward the execrable Instant Messenger shorthand by now familiar to most readers, certainly anyone who's read the writing of middle class kids of drinking age or less: 'r u 4 realz' and that sort of thing. At the same time, the Fantasy kids are equally prone to the florid hand-wringing and odd imaginative projection of young theatre geeks and obsessive diarists. I once had a writing student, a college freshman, who wrote dozens of stories - in a first-person voice that was a heightened version of her own - about powerful young female wizards, whose frustrated sexual urges (always repressed by foolish old authority figures) manifested in ranty monologues and acts of melodramatic (self-)mutilation. That's actually fairly standard fantasy play for neurotic geeky intellectuals of a certain age; the impressive, slightly terrifying twist is that she composed these diaristic screeds in a runic alphabet of her own design. In class she once showed me one of her journals: page upon page of unreadable Tolkienesque gibberish. She was overflowing with pride and glee at that moment; in retrospect I believe that the

act of creation was important to her, as was the therapeutic transference of the subject matter, but her biggest thrill might have been that she made something that no one else could understand. Revenge of a kind, I suppose, and escape into forcible privacy as well; her constant cheeriness was the negative image of the attitude of her writing, a kind of passive-aggressive rationalization of unresolved anger.

We're at about 1,700 words, if you're wondering what that's like. Every day. For a month. I wrote these lines almost a year ago: 'Orpheus didn't go into Hell to get his girlfriend back, he went just to have a girlfriend again. (Easier to visit an old flame, really.)' Which is pretentious yeah but I still kind of laughed. A letter from another self, a year younger.

As if specifically for my amusement and disgust, my student also wore a velvet cape to class and carried a gnarled Gandalfian walking-stick. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Now, I went to MIT, so this sort of thing wasn't new to me, but I continue to insist on the general oddness of her behaviour. Which is why the NaNo Fantasy forums are simultaneously fascinating and repellent: the tone of the discussion is identical to my caped student's way of speaking and writing, and the collective imaginative disposition is similar. The attitude of many posters toward their work evinces the same easy, perverse identification: when the fantasy NaNovelists talk about their characters' autonomous existence - a common trope among fiction writers, and a useful enough metaphor for the integrity and unselfishness required of serious authors - there's often a kind of unsettling flatness of affect to the words, a hint of aestheticized mania, as if the speakers really believed there were living people in their heads about whom they'd committed to writing 50,000 words in a month. Many of the Fantasy NaNovelists arrive at November already having written extensively about their characters and fictional worlds, from character sketches to made-up histories to prose descriptions of fantasy cultures; I remember from own childhood how such stories could ask as a kind of externalized adjunct to a diary, and that's often the tone of the posts. In some forums the writers share detailed maps with one another, showing off the care they've lavished on place names and geography, even if the level of detail and employment of obviously projecting teen-drama tropes (so, so many troublemaking pink-haired punk faeries, half-dragon witch-princesses, and lithe young thieves with hearts of gold and secret royal lineage) much more strongly evokes *Dungeons and Dragons* than Tolkien's encyclopedic/poetic subcreation.

Indeed, reading the Fantasy forums it's hard not to feel like you're listening in on the single most logorrheic group therapy session ever held, in which every patient is secretly convinced (of course) that he's perfectly healthy - or barring that, that being crazy is really *special*, a private joke on the world of Norms. The enthusiasm is infectious, the casualness refreshing - Baty's advice is to think *purely* in terms of word count, forgetting all about quality for the month, and NaNovelists of all stripes, your author included, take that maxim to heart, with the consequence that the task of writing 150 pages of prose seems like a purely mechanical exercise, for better or for worse. Remember, these are people - age 13, age 50, everywhere inbetween and beyond - who are excited to spend a month of their lives doing basically nothing but work, school, and writing a novel. Put

that way, they sound to me like my kind of people; our passions are the same. But dipping a toe into the NaNo Fantasy message board, I'm left with a question: Would Tolkien have done this? *Not in a million years*. OK, but wouldn't he have been happier to do so, knowing other people shared his passion? Perhaps. But would such an alt-historical Tolkien have bothered writing the very *not-a-first-draft* *Lord of the Rings*, an utterly stylized modern novel, knowing he could happily exchange first drafts with ersatz Inklings all over the world? Again - perhaps. But perhaps not. For someone of a bookish disposition, and a mildly traditionalist attitude toward the scholarly side of writing, these questions are worth asking.

So's this one: if Tolkien was otherwise occupied writing generic Mary Sue stories instead of laboriously crafting the many, many drafts of Frodo's tale, mightn't someone else have filled that literary void? A NaNovelist, perhaps, emboldened by the thrill of undertaking her first large project? Or two? Or a hundred?

Which is, I think, to ask: can you fall in love making a porno?

Pornography is to lovemaking as an Ikea catalogue is to your family home, as a crude map is to a countryside: not the real thing, and not that good a guide to what the real thing is like. For many kids, porn is where they first learn about sex, expanding their vocabulary with images and words detached from meaning, but expanding nonetheless. That is to say, porn first enables growth - of information. But it doesn't deepen knowledge: we *know* nothing of sex until we've had it a few times, good or (often, especially at first) bad, at which point porn rapidly goes from being a mechanism for thinking about sex to taking us *away* from the messy (in all senses of the word) reality of that exchange, that experience. Which is why it's not so bad to encounter porn as a kid, but bad to do so without any kind of context, a literary or moral counterpoint.

The sixth chapter of my abortive NaNovel is an interlude about stones and time. It contains these lines, of which I neither proud nor (even now) ashamed:

Picture the crowded sky. No time, no being, no sense of size, no sight. Some things are so big you can never see them; we see clouds and stars, painted on and peeking through the invisible sky itself. The sky is a colour scheme. Some things are so big they can never see.

The westbound bus is a single electron in a single current in a single thought passing through the mind of the sky. Its contents are invisible. It marks the passage of time on a scale of which the sky needs no awareness. We think of a 'thought' but we mean a million billion collisions and transmissions and explosions in our heads. We wouldn't know what to do with a single thought anymore than the sky concerns itself with a single drop of rain. It *is* the rain. It is the clock. The lightning is its sweeping second hand.

Time means nothing to the sky. And the westbound bus, which is about to make its first stop, means even less.

I like the first and the last; the bit about 'collisions' makes me cringe. Like any diary entry.

The NaNoWriMo attitude toward the novel is this: it's a thing you ought to just *do*. There's nothing to any individual story that's sacred, that you need to honor with deliberate conception or a pace suited to the work's individual contours and kineticism. They're just words. The act of writing serves not a deep need to write but the sense of *wouldn't it be cool to be a writer*, wouldn't it be nice to have done this thing, and if this all sounds like the runup to a 'Greatest Generation' rant about the shallowness of contemporary culture, well, you're half right. Or a third and change, maybe. Because as stupid as this sentence is going to end up being, NaNoWriMo is one of the most important things I've *ever* done, the biggest single step forward I've taken as a writer, its personal significance wholly out of proportion with the quality of the work it yielded - which was, I am now able to admit, basically (and not unexpectedly) just utter *shit*. The act of committing to a task of this size, and trying to muster seriousness while at the same time subordinating self-serving writerly impulses (I must be *interesting* here or it will reflect poorly on my inner *being*, where is my transcendental *spirit* blah blah blah, that sort of thing), made a longer-term commitment to a life of writing suddenly realistic.

Yet the vibe of it is wrong somehow, seems so to me, and it might seem like worry over nothing but even this rush of wings can aspire to the level of philosophy, and that's what philosophy is. *Worry over nothing*. Here is an old piece of wisdom: you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. Here is another: a writer is one who writes. And here is a piece of something else: a doctor isn't just someone who goes around cutting people open. There're other words for that. So we can face the pressing question. Can you in fact fall in love on a porn set? By which I hope you now see that I mean: if there is no expectation of progress, of inner disciplining - if, in other words, *no one tells you your writing is bullshit* - how does a NaNovelist become a novelist? Because one who writes isn't necessarily a writer, you see. National Novel Writing Month is a mechanism for exposing a preexisting willingness to commit; it is not itself that commitment. And that's fine, but who's gonna tell the kids? Who's gonna tell the darling NaNo kids?

And why should they give a damn? (Since we're asking irritating questions.)

Chris Baty, new American man, has some pretty sensible things to say about writing. He also says some deeply stupid shit. This is from a mass email, subject line 'Week Three,' sent on 11/15/05 to NaNo participants:

3) Abandon the quest for pretty sentences. Beautiful language is small-stakes writing. We're doing something epic here. We're aiming for completion. We're shooting for the dramatic arc, for the roar of the crowd, for the ticker-tape raining down on us in slow motion as we type our final sentence, run one last word count, and then close the book on a truly triumphant month.

This is big.

This is very big.

And it's yours for the taking. But to get there, you need to give yourself permission to make messes. To write ungainly sentences and create absolutely atrocious dialogue. I know it hurts to leave ugly prose in your book. But you can polish everything to perfection next month. For now, it's all about crossing the halfway point of your novel and beginning the sprint homeward.

There is, I am somewhat closer now to being prepared to accept, something of a mismatch between the style and intentions of NaNoWriMo, on one hand, and my own writerly self-conception on the other. I aspire to writing Serious Literary Fiction, among other things, and there is an implicit rejection of even that *aspiration* in the NaNo publicity materials, to go with an explicit rejection of that pretension and its crippling corollary, the belief that one must write Serious Literary First Drafts, or carry oneself according to some Style Guide for the literati. But dealing with the NaNo disposition is just a matter of personal conditioning: I hold fast to my ambitions and act now (Now! *NOW!*) to broaden my experience of the craft, to motivate myself with great-but-circumscribed achievement. There's nothing written at nanowrimo.org that says you can't finish your 50,000 words and then revise them into *Heart of Darkness* or *Of Mice and Men* (or even *Grendel*, ha ha).

But our goal here is a kind of Sauron's-eye view of the therapeutic paradigm in contemporary American popular conceptions of creativity and the role of the novelist, to put it stuffily, and so a less literary-heroic framework is called for, to wit: what need is something like NaNo serving, and if it's a subconscious need, how does it manifest? Because we're 3,600 words deep into a kind of condemnatory appraisal of NaNoWriMo, we've picked on the Fantasy kids and even one of my old students (have I told you about the one who couldn't understand why we were being asked to write anything, anything at all, other than Shakespearean sonnets?) and read some of Chris Baty's risible clunky offensively-prioritized faux-populist therapeutic-inspirational email, and yet before and after all this bile and head-shaking I did NaNoWriMo 2005 with a very literal vengeance, wrote every day (got up at 5am for the first week to build good habits, though I was sleeping in a bit by midmonth), I even went to the opening day get-together at TOMB in Kenmore Square, the lobby of some kind of ridiculous corporate Egyptian-adventure arcade surrounded by twenty really shockingly dorky Bostonians each scribbling the opening to this or that *roman a most likely clef* that the world has it would seem *inaudibly* been clamoring for, and here look though I hate myself look -

- I'm gonna do it again this year -

- but the *paradigm*, implications for contemporary American benighted hellbound culture and so forth, the damn paradigm. Which basically boils down to: You're OK. (The

Director's Cut is 'I'm OK, you're OK' but I don't want to violate somebody's copyright.)
From the same email, take it away, Chris Baty:

1) The more you write, the more inspired you're going to feel. If you're feeling pokey now, it's because you're not writing enough. Push yourself to write every day, and make a point of adding something to your word count any time you're within striking distance of a keyboard. Harness the power of micro-sessions. If you're far behind, stop figuring out where you're supposed to be each day. Instead, just dive into your story and write until you've rolled the word counter up by a thousand. Then take a twenty-minute break, and go after another thousand. Don't worry about getting caught up - that'll take care of itself. Just keep rolling those thousands.

David Milch says that to write with integrity requires 'going out in spirit' to our characters, gifting them with circumstances that allow their full humanness to flower. Milch is goofy spiritual but he's also a genius and a half, so cut him slack. Now then:

I don't know what Baty did professionally before becoming an evangelist of Shitty First Drafts, but swap out 'word counts' for 'sales quotas' or 'agenda items' and the form of the email becomes clear. His basic advice - that overcoming imaginative friction is a lot easier when you're Just Plain Moving than when you're standing still scratching your head - is solid. But past the creepy 'Getting Things Done' talk of 'micro-sessions' there's a curious bit of instruction in there: if you're behind, forget your numeric goals, and set for yourself *new, smaller numeric goals* by which you'll essentially fool yourself into doing your larger assignments by accident. The same outlook at a different scale: you want to be a Great Writer? Forget about it for the moment, commit to being a Bad But Committed Writer for a month, and you'll eventually turn out to...

But that's not how it works. More wisdom, this time from my high school baseball coach: *Perfect practice makes perfect*. Which is to say, even (especially!) in practice we have a responsibility to pursue excellence. And this advice applies only to those who have a notion of showing up to games and actually *winning*. Those with no such ambition can practice however they want, can write a Shitty Only Draft. But equally likely a curious thing might happen: they'll think in terms not of achievement, not of victory (an ugly but necessary, helpful notion), but of satisfaction. 'Ticker-tape raining down.' Don't worry, 'That'll take care of itself.' This flexible framework of NaNoWriMo, which ostensibly makes no claims on the participant's moral attitude toward writing as a vocation (because it's just a fun gig for November, innit?), turns out to be making a larger-scale behavioural suggestion than we thought. 'We're shooting for the dramatic arc,' yes, but not for our characters. *For ourselves*.

The goal mandates a process. The process implies a mindset. The mindset is inimical to the imperative to write with integrity: to go out in spirit to other human beings. And yes the NaNo crowd is self-selecting, yes it's absolutely wonderful that people are committing themselves to expression through the written word - yes! I'm serious, haven't

I been serious? - and yes it's just a month, but we're not really talking about 50,000 words anymore. National Novel Writing Month is a structure for desire and a set of mechanisms by which that desire can be satisfied. And what is the desire? Nothing more than self-pleasure: to be pleased with oneself. 'The ticker-tape parade.' Diary entries in a private alphabet. Can you fall in love making a porno? Only by accident. And it won't play well onscreen. Best to seek that communion elsewhere. By extension: *best not to make a porno*. There's something else you're after, after all.

I did say I was doing NaNoWriMo 2006, and I am. This year I've even got a plot. More than last year, and that's something.

Dave Sim writes, in his *Guide to Self-Publishing*, that during one period in the early 90's he was working his usual insane long weeks writing and drawing and inking and publishing *Cerebus*, handling the business side of his company Aardvark-Vanaheim, and then working another nearly full-time job on top of that, touring the country advocating restored and expanded rights for comics creators. He was working at the absolute limit of his physical and emotional endurance for a year or two, he says, leaving no time for socializing or self-doubt, only the actions necessary to complete the two great works of his life. It was the happiest he'd ever been, a real Ancient Greek kind of happiness.

Last November I felt something much smaller, but *similar* in a way. Similarly structured perhaps. Or at least I *believed* I did, at the time. I've come to believe that I misunderstood the nature of Sim's vision of perfect happiness (which appeals to me, in its complex clarity). My 35,000 words satisfied me *not* because they were the best work I was capable of, but rather the *most* work. The difference the two is the difference between erotic and pornographic language; between crafting a novel and writing 50,000 words; between the exhaustion of the missionary and that of the cubicle-dweller; between Tolkien and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Or we might say: between your family home and an Ikea catalogue. And yet where the hell else are you going to get your furniture that cheap?

I got out of my own way I think and hope for one paragraph. Just this:

Laura the bookshop keeper is seated on the high riser in the back of the old school's gymnasium between her friends Jo and Nicole, blonde brown blonde hair in a close huddle, cheeks red smiles beaming eyes clear. The morning passed in relative peace and ease and they feel the Festival has started extremely well this year; in high school they shared boyfriends, which everyone knows and still finds funny, and Nicole and Laura kissed in the woods after prom and all summer long, which no one knows or will ever *ever* find out. On the riser below them are Eszter and Gregor, nearly 80 years apiece, likely only sticking around for the afternoon's festivities before retiring early to the house on Jefferson St where they've lived all their adult lives. Her hand rests on his, weighs almost nothing; they've had a good life together and the Festival, every two years, is like a vacation. In 20 years they haven't been on a trip together, since Gregor developed his bad knee, and even then his business travel had

accounted for the largest part of their journeys beyond the village limits. A year from now Eszter's other kidney will fail and she'll slip away from him, in her sleep - a year after that he'll follow. Their breaths are steady and calm, heads inclining toward one another, and her hand weighs nothing at all. There's Karl, Laura's fiancée, hanging back by the emergency exit, smoking a cigarette; and there are Mr and Mrs McAllister, whose son died last summer while camping with friends - they need this almost more than anyone; and Dick Waters, the schoolteacher, his hearing aid no doubt lost again; and there's old Dutch, the merry Englishman who moved to town with his wife and children a few years ago - he's in his usual outfit, a tailored suit still in fine condition after 20 years in his closet ('for safekeeping - it's too good to wear just any old time, you wear a *rubbish* suit to church of course, but feel the *quality* of this'), making jokes that were old before the kids in his small audience were born. Even his laughter has an accent - and his accent gets mysteriously thicker when he's talking to American women, of course. There's the Mayor, Mary Waters, the teacher's eldest daughter, who caused a scandal when she didn't take her husband's name and caused another by being quite a competent though obviously frustrated Mayor on the whole. She wears a blue pantsuit after a certain fashion, her hair short and streaked with red-blond highlights (after another), and the start of the Festival of Permutation is the day she looks forward to most - never more so than since she took over the Mayoral post, with its litany of zoning discussions and unanimous procedural votes and favours granted not to friends but to their Families' Good Names. Her husband Isaac clings to a graduate degree as one sign of his worth, and Mary as another; they met at school, and she stayed in their college town for him so long as he promised to move back with her to take care of her mother in her last year. Like anything else: the last year lasted five, and they're permanent residents now, though mercifully not living with father in law Dick anymore, with *that fucking hearing aid* he's always losing and his constant comments about gays or Arabs or whoever it is he's 'just joking around' about today. Isaac gets to sit at the front of the gym with her but instead sits on the bleachers with everyone, making idle chatter with Laura's younger sister Lynn, back home from senior year this week, sitting maybe a bit too close to her, meeting his wife's eyes maybe once or twice too often, too quickly. The smallest of things. When Mr Waters dies Isaac will cause a little scandal all his own by leaving Mary and moving back to the city; she'll take only the smallest hint of satisfaction in knowing that, in his life, he'll never be happier than when they first met and fell in love, over the heaviest gnocchi either of them had ever eaten or even *heard* of, Jesus! with that olive oil drizzled on top and the *capers*, do you remember? Of course I do, honey, how could I forget?

But it's possible I'm in no position to judge. Someone should be, though. And if the

words were and even are alright and something was learned, if I stood a step beyond myself for a paragraph, is something owed in consequence? To the road, I mean. It took me more than 28,000 words to get to that paragraph, and no other road was possible. It's taken us now 5,500 words to get to *this* paragraph. And isn't gratitude possible? And isn't the responsibility enough? To say, that is: I have undertaken this or that and learned something, *information*, and now the responsibility is mine to transform it into knowledge. I thought we weren't talking anymore about 50,000 words. I guess we aren't, exactly. Maybe that's bad prose, or a failure of imagination. I'm willing to accept that: there's precedent enough, God knows. But if it's alright, and something may come of it, in my own notions yet to be or on the still-unbounded page, then is that an accident? And can I find beauty in such a thing?

The new American man said on December 2, 2005:

Thanks to your generosity, we also raised more money than ever before. Our bills for the year are paid, and funds are tucked away to launch NaNoWriMo's 2006 event. Even more thrillingly, we raised at least \$8000 for our Libraries in Laos project. By the time sign-ups for the next NaNoWriMo begin, there will be four or five new book-filled spaces spread throughout the country; places where Laotian kids can go to discover the magic of reading.

All of which is well and good, but it begs a certain important question. Namely: What the heck do we do now?

It's a great question. And I have a suggestion.

But I'm not interested in hearing it. I like the question.

See you in November.

wgh
21-22 September 2006
Cambridge MA