

Composing With

A State of Ungress: Composing as Rambling

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When things are going well, I love my attic writing space: the slanted walls, the low ceiling crazed with cracks, the perpetual semidark, the walls a sickly blue like an aquarium's inside. But when the work is a struggle, as it was this past September, the roof looms low, the gloom condenses, and it starts to feel like a coffin.

That analogy was a bit too apt, since the book I was working on was a novel about an obituary writer (and a crossword puzzle deviser, but that's a subject for another day). In times of frustration or anxiety, I've always tended toward compulsive motion—for me, the best thing about the invention of the cellphone is that when I'm forced to talk on it, I can do so while walking, whether in caged indoor circles or, better, in a streetscape or wood—and without cocooning myself in coils of grimy cord I'll have to awkwardly pirouette out of at call's end, as often happened in my teens. So when, late last summer, the novel's flow slowed and nearly halted, the dodge I hit upon (I mean the *strategy I devised*) was to prime the pump every morning with an hour-long cemetery walk.



Headstone at Spring Grove Cemetery

This seemed to have some short-term benefit, but as the days passed I found myself less inspired by my rambles—I should note my great good fortune in having, just half a mile from home, one of the first and, at almost a thousand acres, largest park cemeteries in the world, Spring Grove, founded in 1845—than distracted by them. Then one morning, walking a road I'd walked a hundred times, I noticed to my left an eccentric Art Nouveau font, an artist's palette-shaped headstone, and I stopped, punched the deceased's name into Google, plunged into

a story that involved Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman and early photography and a ghost-hosted dinner party . . . and headed down a rabbit hole from which I haven't yet emerged.

Within days I was embarked, it became clear, on another book, another kind of book. Or another of the same kind. My last, the novel *Trophy*, which takes place in the instant of its protagonist's death and features his desperate, meandering ploys to extend that moment, is also about rambling—rambling as existential necessity. Digression, I've always thought, gets a bad rap. The word itself implies that there's a proper gress from which one has strayed, that every life is a line. But surely linearity is something we impose only afterward, when it's time to make a narrative, when it's time to comb out our gresses and untangle them into something we can call *progress* or *congress*. We are poor, forked animals who live most of our lives, and thank God, in a state of ungress, regress, circumgress. Many people live lives packed with incident—but whose has a *plot*?

And so I found myself extending those morning walks in Spring Grove. This was a literalization of what I'd been doing in *Trophy*: more amblings, more attempts to find narrative where I stumbled upon it or tangled myself up in it. Soon I was traversing the cemetery every day, learning to read it, seeing what caught my eye (odd stones, epitaphs, decorations, spacing, plantings), jotting down names and locations, and then going home to explore in a different way the anomalies or idiosyncrasies I'd noticed. I've always been a bleeder, a compulsive reviser who starts at sentence one every morning and then slowly, miserably accretes (or secretes) a book . . . but this is different. It's as if the momentum of my walks carries over to the keyboard, and somehow I've accumulated 50,000 words in just four months—a number that seems miraculous, given that the first 50,000 words of my last book took seven years.

Much of the pleasure of the writing has derived from the chance to experience narrative as a product of impetus and accident. What details will be thrown into conversation or juxtaposition as I walk? Sheepishly, I've begun thinking in terms of rhapsodomancy, the ancient mode of divination that involves flipping open a manuscript of poems at random, or its cousin stichomancy, which takes the Bible as its revelatory text. My chosen form, it seems, is graveyardwalkomancy.

The walks provide, too, a chance to think, à la Jorge Luis Borges's "Garden of Forking Paths," about the bewildering multifariousness of available routes, about the old but easy-to-forget truth that there's not one inevitable form for material to take, that the writer's job is to find *a* way through the maze, not *the* way. The result of all this, I hope, will be—of course I'm well aware it may turn out to be a disaster—a book fundamentally about the role of retracing and coincidence and surprise connection, whether in a walk or in rereading

any familiar text or landscape. Day to day, neither the scape nor its reader remains the same—there are new conditions of light, new angles of vision or vagaries of mood (Back trouble making you wince and slump? Shoe need tying? Clinging to a hedge in driving rain?); trees grow, flowers bloom, leaves fall and mat underfoot; you may follow a turkey or a fox or a wisp of thought over a hill and into an undiscovered glade. You may read a name on a welding shop signboard, then glimpse it on a stone the next day.

For now I'm calling the project *Windfalls in the Bone Orchard*, and I'm trying just to take my luck where I find it, to follow the dead I meet and the links that arise wherever they lead. These are highly discursive essays, in which a gravestone or glimpsed detail may lead to slate-writing spiritualists and Arthur Conan Doyle and Houdini and the origin of the Magic 8-Ball, or where an unusual egalitarian stone listing a couple by first and middle initials, without stipulating gender, may lead to an essay about a leader of the temperance movement, and from there to the Ohio Woman's Crusade of 1874, Cincinnati brewing history, a political party headquartered in a toolshed, Thomas Edison's short-lived movie studio, a version of cornhole involving discarded toilets and beanbags shaped like turds, the geography of urban vice, the local culinary cult of the fish log.

Am I claiming to do something fresh? Dear God no. Others figured out the link between walking and storytelling millennia ago, at least as far back as Plato's strolls in the groves of the Academy, and wandering was a major part of the Romantic poets' philosophy and practice too, and and and. But for me the work of these last months has felt like an utterly new mode of composition, one that's about the conversion of one vector of motion to another. As a high jumper translates speed to altitude, ramble becomes essay . . . and then it turns out that all along, digression wasn't an avoidance of narrative—duh, Michael, you fool—but a subgenre of it.

Because no matter what the spaghetti-ish map of one's wanderings may look like—the loops and eddies, the backtrackings—they turn out, in retrospect, to describe a path. John Barth once wrote, about postmodernism's alleged disdain for narrative, that it's nothing to fret about: "We live in an ocean of story," he said, and wherever one drops one's bucket, it will come up overflowing. It's been nice to rediscover how right he is, and to find, gratefully, that in whatever route one happens to take there seems already inscribed some plan or order. Lately it's occurred to me that for all these years I may have misunderstood the diviners of old, the readers of teacup lees or goat intestines or randomly chosen passages. The object of their faith needn't be God. In the theology Barth implies, when we take the jump into apparent randomness, it's not fate that delivers us; it's narrative. There's nothing we can't make into a story. There's not anything that isn't already one.

Works Cited

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