Voice

CHAPTER ONE

Telling Begins in an Atmosphere of Urgency

When the circumstances are right you can tell extraordinary stories to complete strangers: If you and I are on a crowded train and have to spend the night in the dining car, we may tell each other the most intimate secrets. And if I'm in a foreign city, talking to someone at a café, I may, in fractured French, relate an amazing incident from my life.

In trains, waiting rooms, and strange hotels, during city black-outs and nighttime vigils, when you lose your keys in the rain and spend the evening at a neighbor's house—incredible stories are exchanged. When strangers meet in an atmosphere that allows for excitement and privacy, they tell each other exactly what matters to them at the time. They speak from the heart, forgetting background details. And listeners, responding from the heart, understand.

Readers are also strangers. They may be meeting you only once, just to read this particular story, and may

never meet you again. They don't want to hear what's convoluted, overly private, or extraneous. They want to hear what's important, intimate, and compelling.

Any unusual circumstances can create this sense of urgency. This was eloquently illustrated to me in 1969, when I was part of the Columbia University revolution. Within hours the university was transformed into a foreign country. Students occupied the buildings, and familiar objects like desks and blackboards lost their previous functions. Classrooms turned into dormitories. Offices turned into headquarters. Pamphlets littered the halls. People shed their roles: Professors were no longer professors, students were no longer students. And everyone walked around having very intimate exchanges, saying whatever was on their minds at the moment.

At one point I walked into a room of an occupied building and met someone I'd known in passing. He was large, overbearing, wore thick glasses that made him look bug-eyed and had a crew cut when it wasn't popular. He was also an expert on rockets, made a satellite that was confiscated by the government when he was twelve, and wrote on higher mathematics. Sitting on the floor, wedged between periodicals, with the tersest of introductions, we began to argue about whether history was determined or free. This wasn't the sort of thing I usually talked about to virtual strangers on first meetings. But within this oddly abstract framework, we confided secrets, passions, and memories. The conversation was swift, urgent, and brief. After five minutes we said good-bye. I never saw him again.

Unusual situations call forth voice. But writers must create these situations themselves. When you write, you have to take a leap and live in an atmosphere of urgency. Urgency that creates instant communication. Urgency that allows for excitement. Urgency that lets you touch your reader. In this book we are going to tell you how your voice can connect you to your own sense of urgency, and how you can use your voice to unearth the details that are important to your story. We'll show you how urgency and voice exist in an intimate relationship, how one calls forth the other. We are going to encourage you to avoid writing from a sense of obligation, and stick to the path of excitement and improvisation. In this atmosphere of compression and intimacy, you will learn that your stories can be trusted.

CHAPTER TWO

Voice: Your Most Powerful Tool

What is voice? Does every writer have one? How do you go about finding it?

Your voice is actually a very ordinary thing: It is just who you are, projected artistically. It is often linked to your speaking voice, and your breath, and the rhythms and sense of pace that you draw on when you are too absorbed in what you are saying to listen to yourself from a distance. It is also linked to your body, the language or dialect you spoke in childhood, and whatever naturally interests you. Your voice is how you write when you don't have time to be elegant.

Once, at least once, everyone has had the experience of telling a story well and holding an audience. Maybe you were at a party, and found yourself talking to a group of people. Your voice seemed to hold them, make a direct connection; your words evoked an atmosphere. Or maybe you were in a café having a cup of tea with a friend, and a whole event from childhood unraveled in one piece. Whatever it was that you did then is linked to your voice. The words you chose. The pauses in your breath. Whether you told the story quickly, slowly, angrily, gently. Whether you meandered and went into detail, or got straight to the point. Whether you repeated dialogue, or dwelled on the way rooms looked. Whatever you did then was it—this thing called voice.

When you are able to harness it, voice is a powerful tool. It allows you to take readers wherever you want them to go—often to places that are perilous. It conveys your sense of story with authority. It allows you to get your readers to believe anything. Unlike style, voice can never be imitated. It is like a fingerprint, unique and singular.

Nobody but you has your voice. Yet voice isn't unchanging, nor is it a static, precious commodity. It's always shifting in response to an immediate moment, an intention, an audience. Just as you aren't a static, singular entity, neither is your voice.

Because it belongs to you, your own voice is hard to identify. When it comes to knowing who you are, you are often the last to find out. Most writers struggle to unearth voice—not only because one's own voice is simply too familiar, but also because to speak from your voice means confronting your world, your dreams, and your entire life raw and unsoftened by explanations. This is the world of direct, unfiltered

experience, sensate impressions, and emotions. To find this world you must be willing to seize the unconventional, the unadorned.

Here's an example: For years, I was haunted by a fight my parents had when I was a child, in which my father—quite eloquently—threw a garbage bag of carrot peels against the wall and turned our kitchen into an art gallery. Again and again, I saw the white wall, the bag of garbage, my father's arms, the criss-cross maze of carrot peels. These images were inaudible, like scenes from a silent movie, and I had no desire to search for any language that could tell their story. This self-censorship came not so much from a desire to protect my family, but from ideas about what kind of writer I wanted to be. (Too psychological, I thought, when considering the images as material for a story. Possibly self-pitying and pathetic.) Then one day, I heard a voice saying: *One day my parents had a fight. My mother threw a clock, and my father threw garbage*. My choices after that were two: to take the leap and write the remaining sentences, or to resist. I chose to leap and wrote a story in which I learned something I hadn't known: that this particular fight was a phenomenal theatrical experience, and that I, as a spectator, had enjoyed it.

Another story started by accident—but again a phrase began it. For some time, I heard in my mind the phrase *the bloodwell*. The phrase felt unpleasantly surreal, and I shoved it aside. However, at some point, because the phrase (and the voice that spoke the phrase) haunted me, I decided to take the image literally. As though I were moving into a fluid abstract sculpture, I suddenly could see a well of blood, with shifting translucent shapes. I could feel it surrounded by human activity.

By following the voice and surrendering to it, I discovered significant images—images that contained the core emotional charge of the story I wanted to tell and that unpacked like a series of Russian nesting dolls, allowing me to improvise with relative ease.

A search for voice must always involve a willingness to experience what you already know in a new light. It doesn't matter whether the objects in your world are unaesthetic, beautiful, ordinary, or extraordinary. The key is to become aware of them.

Take some time to notice patterns, sounds, and objects in your everyday life. Look at the floor of your closet. Notice the paper bag flapping on the parking meter near your office. Listen to the phrases that occur to you before you drift off to sleep. Touch the rough concrete post by a neighbor's meadow. You'll find an abundance of images and ideas in things you've taken for granted. This receptive approach to the familiar is the beginning of the discovery of voice.

CHAPTER THREE

The Writer as Singer

In every writer there lurks a singer. It's that voice you had before you ever spoke. One so natural, it was spectacular—full of innate operatic ability. I remember my daughter at nine months gripping the rails of her crib and belting out a wail that shook the neighborhood. Her voice had an authority you couldn't ignore. Fists red, eyes clenched, she cried with an all-consuming bodily passion, worthy of a diva.

Like an opera singer, a baby's whole body works in coordination to produce those piercing cries. The stomach and chest muscles are tight and hard, creating pressure in these body cavities that in turn creates the perfect acoustical atmosphere to amplify sound. The baby's throat is open, offering an unimpeded channel for this pressurized air. The tongue lies flat and vibrates as the air is forced over it, further amplifying and projecting the sound. When the body is such a perfect instrument, sound is pure feeling. Emotion pours from the diaphragm, lungs, fingers, toes.

It's ironic that adult singers have to do breathing exercises for years to learn how to use their bodies the way babies do naturally. Writers, too, have to reach back to that lusty first voice completely in harmony with body, heart, and breath. The natural connection between emotion and sound produces rhythm, force—and gets a response.

Hold this page in front of you like sheet music, stand up straight, and sing the following sentence as if you were an operatic star, with full, emotion-drenched voice:

Maria Velázquez was born on the first of December.

Throw your voice at the wall across the room. Sing it slowly, plaintively. Then huffily, with great impatience. Then enthusiastically, as if you'd just spotted a friend in a crowd. Feel how you use your whole body to produce sound: how you straighten your spine, flex your stomach muscles, widen your rib cage, open your throat. Feel how emotion moves through your body.

If you feel tense, stand and shake your arms and legs. Loosen your neck, tongue, lips. Jump up and down. Relax those muscles in your shoulders. Breath from your diaphragm. Yawn. Cry. Laugh.

Open the Bible at random, put your finger on a verse

and read aloud, listening to the prose as if it were music. Now sing a passage. What kind of singer are you? A blues singer, with an empty heart? A rapper, sizzling with energy? An opera singer at the head of an extravagant processional? Let your voice expand, resonate.

When your singing voice is loose, your writing voice will be, too. Read a passage of your own writing. What kind of music is it? Sing it like German lieder, or rock music, or a classical ballad.

Now do the same thing with four very different writers, say Charles Dickens, Anaïs Nin, Raymond Carver, and Gabriel García Márquez. Whose language would you use to hurl at someone in a fight? Whose would you use to tell a secret? To paint a room?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Importance of Raw Voice

Voice, of course, is a complete and complex orchestra; but for the purpose of talking about the process of creating fiction, it's helpful to talk about two aspects of voice—raw voice and a voice that can tell a whole story. The voice that can tell a whole story is more polished than raw voice, those phrases that just float up to you: *A train to the end of the world. My father throwing garbage. My great-aunt shaking hands while sitting on the toilet. Joanie done got her car stolen.* They're the phrases that you don't consciously solicit or control.

The voice of the story utilizes raw voice. It is what happens to raw voice when it is working with narrative, shape, and form. The voice of the story can work in different forms: spin yarns, evoke images, speak in tongues, write sometimes lyrically, sometimes matter-of-factly. It can write a story or a poem, a screenplay or a novel. It can tell the stories of infinite characters.

RAW VOICE

Raw voice is available to anyone who is human. It uses natural language and often is connected with a sense of urgency and honesty about what is being said. It occurs when people speak as well as when they write, and no one has a corner on it. The following statement by the Italian immigrant and anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti, made after he and Nicola Sacco were sentenced to death for allegedly murdering two men, is an eloquent expression of raw voice:

> *If it had not been for these things, I might have live out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for joostice, for man's onderstanding of man as now we do by accident. Our words—our lives—our pains—nothing! The taking of our lives—lives of a good shoe-maker and a poor fish-peddler—all! That last moment belongs to us—that agony is our triumph.*
>
> —APRIL 9, 1927

You may have intellectual judgments about Vanzetti's guilt or innocence, but your heart cannot argue with the deep sense of connection he is making. Vanzetti can't spell everything correctly. He hasn't mastered the English language. But his inner spirit is there and spirit can't be argued with.

It's important to remember that raw language often contains the seeds of vision—the unique way that each writer sees the world—and that vision inspires language. In this way voice and vision are inseparable: By paying attention to one, you can begin to access the other. Raw voice is a key to vision, because it contains material that is close to what people really think and feel about their experiences. For this reason raw voice often manifests in those very phrases (as well as images and kinesthetic sensations) which seem boring, childlike, or naive. In some sense the ability to capture raw voice comes from a willingness to listen to the unremarkable. It also means listening to something that is close to you.

THE VOICE OF THE STORY

The voice of the story has its seeds in raw voice, but takes the voice one step further—into a realm where it is possible to improvise and, in the process of improvisation, produce a piece that has momentum and unity. This voice is what every writer wants and needs. You cannot write well without it. Here is an example of the voice of the story—a voice that uses raw material, but weaves it into a vision, a unity, a whole.

THE OX

There was once a woman whose father over the years had become an ox.

She would hear him alone at night lowing in his room.

It was only one day when she looked up into his face that she suddenly noticed the ox.

She cried, you're an ox!

And he began to moo with his great pink tongue hanging out of his mouth.

He would stand over his newspaper, turning the pages with his tongue, while he evacuated on the rug.

When this was brought to his attention he would low with sorrow, and slowly climb the stairs to his room, and there spend the night in mournful lowing.

—Russell Edson

This is the refined writer's voice at work—the voice that can tell a whole story. It moves from a beginning to an end, carefully developing a range of significant images. Notice how deftly Edson seizes authority and gets you to believe this impossible situation. The father is lowing. The father is turning the pages of the newspaper with his tongue.

The voice of the story doesn't try to analyze or explain. Edson's logical mind may help him shape his material, but it doesn't take over or control the story. Instead, the raw voice propels the story. He gets us to see the poignant father-ox, turning the newspaper with his tongue, defecating in the living room. We don't know if he was writing about his father, his wife's father, or himself as a father. We don't know whether he originally dreamt the story—nor do we care. He lets the images take him wherever they need to go.

Getting to Know Your Instrument

Beginning writers often forget the importance of letting their raw voice lead the story. They start with the voice of the story, often some other writer's story, and hope it will yield powerful, original material. But this is like trying to compose before you know whether you are composing for a piano or an oboe, perhaps before you even know how a piano or an oboe works. You have to learn your basic instrument first.

Getting to know your raw voice is a perilous process —one that all writers embark on when they start to learn their craft. How do you play such an instrument? Do you sing its scales? Do you tell its stories? Go back to its origins? Revive its history? Or do you simply learn a new way of listening? Chances are that most writers do a combination of these things, as well as finding unique methods (often impossible to articulate) for identifying raw voice when it's there.

In the second section of this book we will grapple with the exciting process of working with raw voice and the more polished voice of the story simultaneously. We'll help you develop a personal alchemy, in which you channel the material of raw voice into a voice that can weave a narrative whole. But first we're going to

explore raw voice in depth. Like the stories in *A Thousand and One Nights,* raw voice has many aspects and keeps unfolding in new guises. We hope you will learn to play with it, revel in it, and trust it.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Voice as an Instrument

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocallissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it!

—WALLACE STEVENS

First and foremost voice deals with sound, quite apart from meaning. When you write, you hear the sounds of the words subliminally. When you speak, you feel vibrations in your body. These sounds are connected to a web of meaning, and you can never disengage from that web completely. With a little practice, however, you can return to the experience of your voice as an elemental instrument.

In a letter to Eugène Lefébre, (May 17, 1867), Mallarmé said:

> *I think the healthy thing for man—for reflective nature—is to think with the whole body; then you get a full harmonious thought, like violin strings, vibrating in unison with the hollow wooden box. But I think that when thoughts come*

> *from the brain alone (the brain I abused so much last summer and part of last winter), they are like tunes played on the squeaky part of the first string.... On Easter day I got a terrible headache from thinking only with my brain, after I had gotten it going with coffee; because it can't get going by itself, and my nerves were probably too tired to respond to any outside impression; I tried to stop thinking that way, and with a tremendous effort I braced the nerves in my chest so as to produce a vibration—still holding on to the thought I was then working on.... Ever since then, whenever the crucial hour of synthesis approaches, I say to myself: "I am going to work with my heart"; and then I feel my heart ... and the rest of my body is forgotten, except for the hand that is writing, and the living heart, and my poem is begun—begins itself."*

Mallarmé understood that the whole body participates in the creation of voice. He also sensed that where voice resides (or is placed) in the body affects the quality of writing. Some writers readily grasp the connection between voice and the body. But if you tend to think of writing as a purely mental act, Mallarmé's model may help you.

In the seventies, I taught journal workshops to students who practiced yoga, chanted mantras, and never let a class go by without doing neck exercises. When I told them "Voice is sound," they looked at me strangely. They didn't need an explanation for something they instinctively understood.

The same year, however, I worked with a group of college professors who were feeling blocked with their academic writing. They were fascinated to discover the role the body plays in language. Somewhat tentatively (and quoting Mallarmé for ballast), I explained to them that in yoga each part of the body is assigned a special sound, and sometimes people strengthen their awareness of the body by chanting these sounds. Far from being skeptical, they wanted to know the syllables and asked that we spend time in class chanting. I didn't want to appear to be a crackpot, so I led them hesitantly, chanting softly. Almost immediately, everyone went into a trance. In particular I have a vivid memory of an elderly dean, sitting cross-legged on the floor, rocking back and forth, with his eyes closed. Later he reported hearing a lyric passage—his first experience with raw, natural voice. This passage became the first paragraph of a story. Eventually his academic writing began to come more easily. "Why?" I asked. "I don't know," he answered. "Maybe my more personal writing found another outlet. Maybe I just relaxed about it."

If you're curious, you can begin to experiment with your own voice as an instrument: Like Mallarmé, you can make your voice resonate from different parts of your body and discover the different emotions and sounds that arise. Take a leap of faith and believe that each part of your body can speak. Imagine that your entire body is a vehicle for speech and sound—a

luminous and versatile transmitter. Let your stomach write a paragraph. Then your heart. Now let your forehead speak. Does your writing change as your body focus shifts? Are the rhythms different? The emotions? The sounds?

In the process you may become aware of the role breath plays in human speech. Breath creates natural pauses between thoughts and the sense of true silence between paragraphs. Furthermore, breathing deeply can help you connect to emotions, and emotions help you connect to language. (A number of writers, myself included, have discovered that shallow breathing accompanies periods of feeling stymied or blocked.) Write a paragraph holding your breath and see how hard that is.

IMITATING THE FLOW OF SPEECH

Writing structured, resonant nonsense can help you imitate the flow and spirit of human speech. This is another way to discover voice as an instrument, and language as a form of play, freed from the burden of meeting. The rules are simple: 1) the sentences must be grammatical, and 2) the words mustn't link together in any *consciously* associative way. (The mind automatically makes sense of grammatical language. Don't worry if the exercise "makes sense" or the phrases carry metaphoric weight when you read them over.)

This is a halfway point between giving voice complete freedom and working within some kind of structure. Like Lucky, who made an outrageously nonsensical speech in *Waiting for Godot*, you can mimic language, savor the pure sound of words out of context, revel in their absurdity, feel bound and even challenged by the limits of grammar. You're only working with individual sentences at this point, but this exercise may give you a glimpse into more sophisticated uses of improvisation you will need later, when you work on a complete story.

Here's an example:

> *Although spoons create kymographic leaves, the undulating verve of the bracken riveted rice, and when the callous failed, luminous clacks vied the loom with a sandwich; but the miracle mill-raced on, and a liver starch gave in to gibbous grommets—so it wasn't before the onerous futhark of climbs unfurled. And once, when the bombastic fungi lubricated the switch-yard, imperilment was delayed. Ladder! Units! The potash massacre is electrolyzed!*

Everybody finds their own way of writing nonsense. Some people begin by looking around their room and choosing various objects. Others look up words in the dictionary. Others make up nonsense syllables. Some people scan memory, finding words from different

Everybody finds their own way of writing nonsense. Some people begin by looking around their room and choosing various objects. Others look up words in the dictionary. Others make up nonsense syllables. Some people scan memory, finding words from different phases in their life. Others go into a kind of dream state. Whatever you do may give you insight into your creative process.

Various benefits can emerge from this exercise: Many people report that they actually experience their voice as a musical instrument, independent from meaning. They suddenly discover an urge to work with cadence, rhythm, alliteration. Others say they go on a kind of archaeological dig, excavating voices inside of them, uncovering layers of their own language systems. (I wrote for a while in the rhythms of Old English. Others find themselves writing in dialects or the voices of grandparents.) Some find phrases that suggest stories or stumble on the voice of characters. Also, the inner critic—that insufferable backseat driver—often becomes distracted by assisting in nonsense and later, when you sit down to write a first draft of a story, will stop interrupting with sensible questions. Unfettered by meaning, voice begins to take you where it wants to go. You begin to make new links between words, use sentences you never dreamed of.