

Raymond Carver **Foc_s** Fires



Les influències són forces —circumstàncies, personatges— tan irresistibles com les marees. No sabria dir els llibres o escriptors que m'han influït. Més difícil atribuir amb certa precisió aquest tipus d'influència, la literària. Seria tan inexacte dir que m'ha influït tot el que he llegit com afirmar que cap escriptor no ha exercit damunt meu la seva influència. Per exemple, durant molt de temps he estat un apassionat lector de les novel·les i les narracions breus d'Ernest Hemingway. Encara que penso que el llenguatge de l'obra de Lawrence Durrell és únic i no ha estat superat. Evidentment, no escric com Durrell. És clar que no el puc considerar una «influència». Alguna vegada s'ha dit que la meva literatura és «com» la de Hemingway. Però no puc pas dir que la seva manera d'escriure m'influís. Hemingway és un dels molts escriptors l'obra del qual, tal com la de Durrell, vaig llegir i vaig admirar per primer cop en la meva joventut.

Així, doncs, no entenc en influències literàries. Però sí que tinc alguna idea respecte a una altra mena d'influències. Les influències de què puc parlar m'han marcat de maneres que a primera vista acostumaven a ser misterioses, que de vegades podien arribar a fregar el miracle. Però se m'han anat esclarint a mesura que la meva obra ha anat avançant. Aquestes influències eren (i ho continuen sent) implacables. Són elles les que em van portar en aquesta direcció, a aquesta llengua de terra en comptes de qualsevol altra (aquella de l'altre extrem del llac, per exemple). Però, si la principal influència de la meva vida i de la meva obra ha estat de signe negatiu, opressiva i sovint malèvola, tal com penso que ha estat, com interpretar-la?

Permetin-me començar dient que escric tot això en un lloc anomenat Yaddo, situat a la sortida de Saratoga Springs, Nova York. Som a començament d'agost, un diumenge a la tarda. De tant en tant, més o menys cada vint-i-cinc minuts, m'arriben les veus de més de trenta mil persones unides en un gran clam. Aquest meravellós xivarri prové de les curses de cavalls de Saratoga. S'està disputant una famosa competició. Escric, però cada vint-i-cinc minuts sento pels altaveus la veu del locutor, que enumera les posicions dels cavalls. L'esvalot de la multitud augmenta. Un soroll fort i realment emocionant esclata per damunt dels arbres i s'eleva fins que els cavalls travessen la línia d'arribada. Quan finalitza, em sento esgotat, com si també hi hagués participat. M'imagino que he apostat per un dels cavalls guanyadors o per algun dels que se'ls hi ha acostat. Si hi ha una foto del final a la línia d'arribada, em puc esperar una altra exclamació un parell de minuts després, un cop revelat el rodet i un cop fets públics els resultats.

Des de fa uns quants dies, des que vaig arribar i vaig sentir la veu del locutor pels altaveus i els crits excitats de la gentada, he estat escrivint una narració breu ambientada al Paso, una ciutat on vaig viure un quant temps ja fa anys. A la història, una sèrie de gent va a les curses de cavalls a un estadi de fora el Paso. No vull pas dir que el meu relat havia estat esperant que algú l'escrivis. No, i dir-ho fóra donar-li un significat que no té. Però en aquest cas concret, aquesta història necessitava alguna cosa que la fes sortir a l'exterior. Llavors, quan vaig arribar a Yaddo, i vaig sentir

per primera vegada el públic i la veu del locutor pels altaveus, em van evocar altres coses de la vida del Paso i em van inspirar la història. Vaig recordar la pista de l'hipòdrom a què havia anat i d'algunes coses que van succeir, que **podien** haver succeït, que succeirien —en tot cas a la meva història—, a tres mil quilòmetres.

Així doncs, la meva història és en marxa i aquí ve aquell aspecte de les «influències». Naturalment, tot escriptor està exposat a aquest tipus d'influència. És la més corrent: **Això** em suggereix allò, **allò** em suggereix allò altre. Aquesta classe d'influència ens és tan quotidiana, tan natural com l'aigua de pluja.

Però abans de continuar amb el tema que desitjo tractar, permetin-me un altre exemple d'influències similar al primer. No fa gaire, a Siracusa, on visc, estava escriuint un relat curt quan va sonar el telèfon. Vaig contestar. A l'altra punta de l'aparell va parlar una veu que pertanyia, ben segur, a un home negre, algú que preguntava per un tal Nelson. S'havia equivocat de número, li ho vaig dir i vaig penjar. Vaig tornar a la meva història. Però de seguida em vaig sorprendre introduint-hi un personatge negre, un tipus bastant sinistre anomenat Nelson. En aquell moment la història va fer un tomb diferent. Però afortunadament —ho veig ara i, en certa manera, ja ho sabia en aquell moment— era el tomb que havia de fer. Quan vaig començar a escriure aquella història no podia haver anticipat o previst la necessitat de la presència de Nelson. Però ara, un cop acabada i a punt d'aparèixer en una revista nacional, veig que és correcte i apropiat i crec que estèticament correcte, que Nelson hi sigui, i a més a més amb el seu aspecte sinistre. I també em sembla correcte que aquest personatge trobés la manera d'entrar a la història per una justa coincidència en què vaig tenir l'encert de confiar.

Tinc mala memòria. Amb això vull dir que he oblidat gran part del que ha ocorregut —la qual cosa és, sens dubte, una sort—, tinc aquells llargs períodes de temps dels quals no puc donar raó o els quals no puc portar a la memòria, pobles i ciutats en què he viscut, noms de persones, les mateixes persones. Enormes espais en blanc. Però recordo algunes coses. Petites coses. Una persona dient alguna cosa d'una manera determinada; la rialla estrepitosa, o suau o nerviosa d'algú, un paisatge; una expressió de tristesa o de perplexitat a la cara d'algú. I també recordo algunes coses espectaculars: algú que agafa un ganivet i se'm gira enfurismat, o la meva mateixa veu amenaçant una persona. Veure com algú tira a terra una porta o cau per l'ull de l'escalera. Alguns d'aquests records més forts els puc rememorar quan els necessito. Però no tinc el tipus de memòria capaç de reproduir converses senceres, amb tots els gestos i matisos; ni tampoc el mobiliari d'una habitació en què he passat temps, per no parlar ja de la meva incapacitat de recordar el mobiliari de tota una casa. O fins i tot, moltes coses específiques de la pista de competicions, llevat, vejam, de la tribuna principal, les finestretes de les apostes, pantalles de televisió de circuit tancat, masses de gent. Cridòria. M'invento les converses de les històries. Vaig col·locant el mobiliari i les coses físiques que rodegen els personatges de les meves històries a mesura que els necessito. Potser és aquesta la raó per què de vegades han dit que les meves històries estan desproveïdes d'adorns, desguarnides, fins i tot que són «minimalistes». Però

potser no és més que un matrimoni de necessitat i conveniència allò que m'ha portat a escriure el tipus d'històries que escric i de la forma com les escric.

És clar que cap de les meves històries no ha **succeït** realment —no escric autobiografies—, però la major part d'elles tenen certa semblança, si bé incerta, amb alguns successos o amb situacions de la vida. Però quan intento recordar l'entorn físic o el mobiliari que sustentava la situació d'una història (si hi havia flors, quines flors eren, si feien bona olor o si almenys en feien), sovint em quedo completament en blanc. Per això ho haig d'anar recreant tot a mesura que avanço: allò que els personatges diuen, i el que fan després de dir-se tal cosa i tal altra, i allò que posteriorment els passa. M'invento el que es diuen, encara que en el dialeg pot haver alguna expressió, una o dues frases que he sentit en alguna ocasió en un context determinat i en una determinada època. Aquesta frase pot haver estat el punt de partida de la meva història.

Quan Henry Miller havia superat ja els quaranta anys i escrivia *Tròpic de Càncer*, llibre que, per cert, em va agradar molt, parlava del fet d'escriure en una habitació prestada, en què en qualsevol moment et pots veure obligat a deixar d'escriure, perquè et poden treure la cadira on seus. Fins una època bastant recent, aquesta era la situació de la meva vida. Perquè, si no recordo malament, des de la meva adolescència, el fet que em poguessin treure la cadira on seja m'era un motiu constant de preocupació. Durant anys i anys la meva dona i jo vam estar anant amunt i avall per mantenir un sostre sota el qual allotjar-nos i tenir pa i llet per a posar a taula. No teníem diners, ni habilitats comerciables, visibles, és a dir, res que poguéssim fer per guanyar alguna mica més que el just per anar tirant. I no teníem formació, encara que tots dos la desitjàvem ardentment. L'educació, creiem, ens obriria totes les portes, ens ajudaria a trobar feina, amb la qual cosa podríem portar el tipus de vida que desitjàvem per a nosaltres i els nostres fills. Teníem grans somnis, la meva dona i jo. Pensàvem que podíem esllomar-nos, treballar molt i fer tot allò que ens il·lusionava. Però anàvem errats.

Haig de dir que qui han exercit la més gran influència damunt la meva vida i la meva obra, de manera directa i indirecta, han estat els meus dos fills. Van néixer abans que jo fes vint anys, i des del començament fins al final de la nostra convivència sota el mateix sostre —uns dinou anys en total—, no hi va haver ni un sol racó de la meva vida on no sentís la seva profunda i de vegades perniciosa influència.

En un dels seus assaigs, Flannery O'Connor diu que complerts els vint anys ja no poden ocórrer gaires coses a la vida d'un escriptor. Que a aquestes alçades ja li ha passat gairebé tot el que li servirà de base a la ficció. Més que suficient, diu ella. Prou material com perquè li duri tot el que li resta de vida creativa. En el meu cas, això no és cert. Tot el que se'm presenta com a «material» per a un relat ha estat posterior als vint anys. El cert és que gairebé no recordo què era la meva vida abans de ser pare. I sento com si no m'hagués passat res fins que vaig fer vint anys, em vaig casar i vaig tenir els nanos. Llavors van començar a passar coses.

A mitjan dels seixanta estava en una bugaderia plena de gent a Iowa City amb

prou roba per omplir cinc o sis rentadores, sobretot roba infantil, però també una mica de la nostra, de la meva dona i meva. Aquell dissabte a la tarda, la meva dona treballava de cambrera al club atlètic de la universitat. Jo m'ocupava de les feines de casa i de les criatures. Aquella tarda estaven amb altres nens, potser en una festa d'aniversari o una cosa així. Però en aquell precís moment, jo estava fent la bugada. Ja me les havia tingut amb una vella rondinaire per la quantitat de rentadores que havia d'utilitzar. I en aquell moment estava esperant tanda amb ella, o amb algú com ella. Estava pendent de les assecadores que funcionaven a l'atapeïda bugaderia. Quan qualsevol d'elles es parés, jo planejava llançar-m'hi amb la bossa d'anar a comprar plena de roba molla. Posin-se en el meu lloc, feia més de mitja hora que era a la bugaderia amb el cistell de roba esperant una oportunitat. Ja se m'havien escapat un parell d'assecadors, algú hi havia arribat abans que jo. Em començava a posar frenètic. Com ja he dit, no estic segur d'on eren els nens aquella tarda. Potser els havia d'anar a buscar a algun lloc i se m'estava fent tard, i allò contribuïa al meu estat nerviós. Sabia que encara que pogués ficar la roba en una assecadora, tardaria una hora o més a eixugar-se i després encara l'hauria de ficar al cistell i endur-me-la a casa, al nostre apartament, en una àrea d'habitatges per a estudiants casats. Al final, l'assecadora es va parar. I jo era allà mateix en aquell moment. La roba de l'interior ya deixar de donar voltes i es va quedar quieta. Si passaven uns trenta segons sense que ningú la reclamés, estava disposat a treure-la i ficar-hi la meva. És la llei de la bugaderia. Però en aquell instant una dona es va acostar a l'assecadora i en va obrir la porta. Em vaig quedar esperant. Aquella dona va ficar la mà a l'assecadora i va comprovar-ne algunes peces. Però va decidir que encara no estaven ben seques. Va tancar la màquina i hi introduí dues monedes més. Ofuscat, vaig allunyar-me amb el meu carretó de supermercat i em vaig quedar esperant. Però recordo que en aquell moment vaig pensar, enmig d'aquells sentiments d'impotent frustració que em tenien a punt de plorar, que res —i quan dic res és res— del que em pogués passar en aquesta vida podia assemblar-se d'alguna manera, podia ser tan important, em podia canviar tant la vida, com el fet de ser pare de dos fills. I que sempre els tindria i sempre em trobaria en aquella posició d'invariable responsabilitat i pertorbació permanent.

Ara parlo d'**influències** autèntiques. Parlo de la lluna i les marees. Però em va sobrevenir d'aquesta manera. Com una brisa gelada quan s'obre de cop una finestra. Fins aquell moment de la meva vida havia pensat —exactament què no ho sé— que les coses d'alguna manera se solucionarien, que tot allò que esperava o desitjava fer en la meva vida era possible. Però llavors, a la bugaderia, em vaig adonar simplement que allò no era cert. Em vaig adonar —què devia haver estat pensant fins llavors?— que la major part de la meva vida era una fotesa caòtica i sense gaire claredat. En aquell moment vaig sentir —ho sabia— que la meva vida era completament diferent de les dels escriptors que més admirava. Entenia que els escriptors eren persones que no es passaven el dissabte a la bugaderia i totes les hores desperts pendants de les necessitats i els capricis dels seus fills. Segur, segur que hi ha hagut infinitat d'escriptors que han hagut de superar obstacles molt més seriosos per treballar, incloent-hi la presó,

la ceguesa, amenaces de tortura o de mort en una forma o una altra. Però això no em servia de consol. En aquell moment —juro que tot això es va desenvolupar a la bugaderia— no vaig veure davant meu sinó anys i anys amb aquesta mena de responsabilitats i perplexitats. Les coses podien canviar una mica, però no millorarien mai. Ho vaig comprendre, però com podria viure amb tot allò? En aquell moment vaig veure que havia de fer alguns ajusts. Calia rebaixar les perspectives. Més endavant em vaig adonar que havia tingut una inspiració. Però, i què? Què són les inspiracions? No ajuden gens. Només fan les coses encara més difícils.

Durant anys, la meva dona i jo ens havíem entestat a creure que si treballàvem molt i intentàvem fer el que ens pertocava, ens aniria d'allò més bé. No em sembla malament això d'intentar fonamentar-te la vida. Treball dur, objectius, bones intencions, lleialtat, crèiem que totes aquestes coses eren virtuts que algun dia serien recompensades. Somiàvem, quan teníem temps per a fer-ho. Però, amb el temps, ens vam adonar que treballar molt i tenir somnis no era prou. A Iowa City, o potser més endavant, a Sacramento, els somnis van començar a fer-se trossos.

Va arribar el dia en què tot allò que per a la meva dona i per a mi mateix era sagrat, o que consideràvem digne de respecte, tots els valors espirituals se'ns van ensorzar. Ens havia passat una cosa terrible. Era una cosa que no havíem vist que passés a cap altra família. Era una erosió i no podíem deturar-la. D'alguna manera, quan vam deixar de mirar, ens vam trobar els nens asseguts al seient del conductor. Per desconcertant que ara soni, van agafar les regnes. Nosaltres, senzillament, no podíem preveure que ens passaria una cosa així.

Durant aquells brutals anys de paternitat, no acostumava a tenir prou temps o ànims per a pensar a treballar en alguna cosa més llarga. Les circumstàncies de la meva vida no m'ho permetien. Les circumstàncies de la meva vida amb aquells fills prescrivien una altra cosa. Em van dir que si volia escriure alguna cosa i acabar-la, i que si pretenia disfrutar de la satisfacció del treball acabat, m'havia de limitar a escriure narracions i poemes. La mena de coses breus que amb només asseure'm i amb una mica de sort podia aconseguir acabar d'escriure. Molt aviat, molt abans fins i tot d'anar a Iowa City, havia comprès que em costaria escriure una novel·la, donada la meva nerviosa incapacitat de concentrar-me en alguna cosa durant un període de temps llarg. Girant la vista enrere, ara crec que m'estava tornant boig de frustració durant aquells anguniosos anys. Sigui com sigui, aquestes circumstàncies van dictar en la me-sura del possible les formes que podia adoptar la meva tasca creativa. Per Déu, no me'n lamento; em limito a exposar uns fets des d'un cor apesarat i encara atordit.

Si hagués pogut recopilar els meus pensaments i concentrar les energies en una novel·la, és a dir, no estava en una posició que em permetés esperar una retribució que, si és que arribava, podia ser al cap d'uns quants anys. M'havia d'asseure i havia d'escriure alguna cosa que pogués acabar llavors mateix, aquella nit o, com a molt, l'endemà a la nit, no més tard, després de tornar de la feina i abans que hi perdés l'interès. En aquella època sempre feia qualsevol feina i la meva dona també. Feia de cambrera o de venedora que va casa per casa. Anys després arribà a professora d'ensenya



Barcelona 1988. Foto: Quim Nolla.



I influences are forces —circumstances, personalities, irresistible as the tide. I can't talk about books or writers who might have influenced me. That kind of influence, literary influence, is hard for me to pin down with any kind of certainty. It would be as inaccurate for me to say I've been influenced by everything I've read as for me to say I don't think I've been influenced by any writers. For instance, I've long been a fan of Ernest Hemingway's novels and short stories. Yet I think Lawrence Durrell's work is singular and unsurpassed in the language. Of course, I don't write like Durrell. He's certainly no «influence». On occasion it's been said that my writing is «like» Hemingway's writing. But I can't say his writing influenced mine. Hemingway is one of the many writers whose work, like Durrell's, I first read and admired when I was in my twenties.

So I don't know about literary influences. But I do have some notions about other kinds of influences. The influences I know something about have pressed on me in ways that were often mysterious at first glance, sometimes stopping just short of the miraculous. But these influences have become clear to me as my work has progressed. These influences were (and they still are) relentless. These were the influences that sent me in this direction, onto this spit of land instead of some other—that one over there on the far side of the lake, for example. But if the main influence on my life and writing has been a negative one, oppressive and often malevolent, as I believe is the case, what am I to make of this?

Let me begin saying that I'm writing this at a place called Yaddo, which is just outside of Saratoga Springs, New York. It's afternoon, Sunday, early August. Every so often, every twenty-five minutes or so, I can hear upwards of thirty thousand voices joined in a great outcry. This wonderful clamor comes from the Saratoga race course. A famous meet is in progress. I'm writing, but every twenty-five minutes I can hear the announcer's voice coming over the loudspeaker as he calls the positions of the horses. The roar of the crowd increases. It bursts over the trees, a great and truly thrilling sound, rising until the horses have crossed the finish line. When it's over, I feel spent, as if I too had participated. I can imagine holding pari-mutuel tickets on one of the horses who finished in the money, or even a horse who came close. If it's a photo finish at the wire, I can expect to hear another outburst a minute or two later, after the film has been developed and the official results posted.

For several days now, ever since arriving here and upon first hearing the announcer's voice over the loudspeaker, and the excited roar from the crowd, I've been writing a short story set in El Paso, a city where I lived for a while some time ago. The story has to do with some people who go to a horse race at a track outside of El Paso. I don't want to say the story has been waiting to be written. It hasn't, and it would make it sound like something else to say that. But I needed something, in the case of this particular story, to push it out into the open. Then after I arrived here at Yaddo and first heard the crowd, and the announcer's voice over the loudspeaker, certain things came back to me from that other life in El Paso and suggested the story. I remembered that track I went to down there and some things that took place, that might have taken place, that will

take place —in my story anyway— two thousand miles away from here.

So my story is under way, and there is that aspect of «influences». Of course, every writer is subject to this kind of influence. This is the most common kind of influence —this suggests that, that suggest something else. It's the kind of influence that is as common to us, and as natural, as rain water.

But before I go on to what I want to talk about, let me give one more example of influence akin to the first. Not so long ago in Syracuse, where I live, I was in the middle of writing a short story when my telephone rang. I answered it. On the other end of the line was the voice of a man who was obviously a black man, someone asking for a party named Nelson. It was a wrong number and I said so and hung up. I went back to my short story. But pretty soon I found myself writing a black character into my story, a somewhat sinister character whose name was Nelson. At that moment the story took a different turn. But happily it was, I see now, and somehow knew at the time, the right turn for the story. When I began to write that story, I could not have prepared for or predicted the necessity for the presence of Nelson in the story. But now, the story finished and about to appear in a national magazine, I see it is right and appropriate and, I believe, aesthetically correct, that Nelson be there, and be there with his sinister aspect. Also right for me is that this character found his way into my story with a coincidental rightness I had the good sense to trust.

I have a poor memory. By this I mean that much that has happened in my life I've forgotten —a blessing for sure—but I have these large periods of time I simply can't account for or bring back, towns and cities I've lived in, names of people, the people themselves. Large blanks. But I can remember some things. Little things—somebody saying something in a particular way; somebody's wild, or low, nervous laughter; a landscape; an expression of sadness or bewilderment on somebody's face; and I can remember some dramatic things—somebody picking up a knife and turning to me in anger; or else hearing my own voice threaten somebody else. Seeing somebody break down a door, or else fall down a flight of stairs. Some of those more dramatic kinds of memories I can recall when it's necessary. But I don't have the kind of memory that can bring entire conversations back to the present, complete with all the gestures and nuances of real speech; nor can I recall the furnishings of any room I've ever spent time in, not to mention my inability to remember the furnishings of an entire household. Or even very many specific things about a race track —except, let's see, a grandstand, betting windows, closed-circuit TV screens, masses of people. Hubbub. I make up the conversations in my stories. I put the furnishings and the physical things surrounding the people into the stories as I need those things. Perhaps this is why it's sometimes been said that my stories are unadorned, stripped down, even «minimalist», but maybe it's nothing more than a working marriage of necessity and convenience that has brought me to writing the kind of stories I do in the way that I do.

None of my stories really **happened**, of course—I'm not writing autobiography—but most of them bear a resemblance, however faint, to certain life occurrences or situations. But when I try to recall the physical surroun-

ment superior. Però això va passar anys després. Vaig treballar en una servadora, vaig treballar de conserge, de repartidor, vaig treballar en estacions de servei, en magatzems, qualsevol cosa que se'ls pugui acudir l'he feta. Un estiu, a Arcata, Califòrnia, per poder subsistir recollia tulipes, ho juro, durant les hores del dia; de nits, després de tancar, netejava l'interior d'un restaurant de cotxes i escombrava tota l'àrea d'estacionament. Una vegada fins i tot vaig considerar la possibilitat —tenia davant meu la sol·licitud de treball—, ni que fos per uns instants, de treballar de cobrador.

En aquella època pensava que si podia robar un parell d'hores al dia per a mi mateix, després de la feina i la família, en tenia prou. Era el cel mateix. I em sentia feliç de poder disfrutar d'aquella hora. Però de vegades, per un motiu o altre no ho aconseguia. Llavors vivia desitjant que arribés dissabte, si bé a vegades passaven coses que també m'espatlaven el dissabte. Però encara em quedava el diumenge. Potser el diumenge.

No em veia treballant en una novel·la d'aquella manera, és a dir, de cap manera. Em semblava que per escriure una novel·la l'escriptor havia de viure en un món amb sentit, un món en què creïs, pel qual apostés i sobre el qual escrivís amb precisió. Un món que es quedés fix en un lloc, ni que fos nomeś durant un temps. Juntement a això, hi ha d'haver fe en la **rectitud** essencial d'aquest món. Una creença en el fet que el món conegit té les seves raons d'existir, i que val la pena escriure sobre ell i que no s'esfumarà en el procés. Aquest no era el cas del món que jo coneixia i en què vivia. El meu món semblava que canviés de marxa i de direcció i de normes cada dia. Un cop i un altre arribava a un punt en què no podia veure o planejar amb més antelació que el primer dia del mes següent, i reunir prou diners, contra vent i marea, per poder pagar el lloguer del pis i comprar roba als nens per anar a col·legi. És cert.

Desitjava veure resultats tangibles als meus esforços literaris, per anomenar-los d'alguna manera. Ni vals ni promeses, ni certificats professionals, per favor. Així doncs, deliberadament i per necessitat, em vaig limitar a escriure coses que sabia que podia acabar d'una tirada, o com a màxim en dues vegades. Parlo del primer esborrany. Sempre he tingut paciència per reescriure, però en aquella època anhelava alegrement el moment de la revisió, ja que m'omplia un temps que jo volia ocupar. En certa manera, no tenia gens de pressa per acabar la història o el poema en què treballava, perquè acabar una cosa significava que havia de trobar el temps i la fe per començar-ne una altra. Així que tenia molta paciència amb una obra una vegada feta la versió inicial. Sempre guardava alguna cosa a casa durant molt de temps, hi jugava, ho modificava, hi afegia detalls, en suprimia.

Aquesta manera d'escriure a la bona de Déu va durar gairebé dues dècades. Hi hagué també bons moments, naturalment; certs plaers d'adult i satisfaccions a les quals només els pares tenen accés. Però m'enverinaria abans de tornar a viure aquell període.

Ara les circumstàncies de la meva vida són molt diferents, però ara escullo escriure històries i poemes curts. O, almenys, això em sembla. Potser no és altra cosa

dings or furnishings bearing on a story situation (what kind of flowers, if any, were present? Did they give off any odor? etc.), I'm often at a total loss. So I have to make it up as I go along —what the people in the story say to each other, as well as what they do then, after thus and so was said, and what happens to them next. I make up what they say to each other, though there may be, in the dialogue, some actual phrase, or sentence or two, that I once heard given in a particular context at some time or other. That sentence may even have been my starting point for the story.

When Henry Miller was in his forties and was writing **Tropic of Cancer**, a book, incidentally, that I like very much, he talks about trying to write in this borrowed room, where at any minute he may have to stop writing because the chair he is sitting on may be taken out from under him. Until fairly recently, this state of affairs persisted in my own life. For as long as I can remember, since I was a teenager, the imminent removal of the chair from under me was a constant concern. For years and years my wife and I met ourselves coming and going as we tried to keep a roof over our heads and put bread and milk on the table. We had no money, no visible, that is to say, marketable skills —nothing that we could do toward earning anything better than a get-by living. And we had no education, though we each wanted one very badly. Education, we believed, would open doors for us, help us get jobs so that we could make the kind of life we wanted for ourselves and our children. We had great dreams, my wife and I. We thought we could bow our necks, work very hard, and do all that we had set our hearts to do. But we were mistaken.

I have to say that the greatest single influence on my life, and on my writing, directly and indirectly, has been my two children. They were born before I was twenty, and from beginning to end of our habitation under the same roof —some nineteen years in all— there wasn't any area of my life where their heavy and often baleful influence didn't reach.

In one of her essays Flannery O'Connor says that not much needs to happen in a writer's life after the writer is twenty years old. Plenty of the stuff that makes fiction has already happened to the writer before that time. More than enough, she says. Enough things to last the writer the rest of his creative life. This is not true for me. Most of what now strikes me as story «material» presented itself to me after I was twenty. I really don't remember much about my life before I became a parent. I really don't feel that anything happened in my life until I was twenty and married and had the kids. Then things started to happen.

In the mid 1960s I was in a busy laundromat in Iowa City trying to do five or six loads of clothes, kid's clothes, for the most part, but some of our own clothing, of course, my wife's and mine. My wife was working as a waitress for the University Athletic Club that Saturday afternoon. I was doing chores and being responsible for the kids. They were with some other kids that afternoon, a birthday party maybe. Something. But right then I was doing the laundry. I'd already had sharp words with an old harridan over the number of washers I'd had to use. Now I was waiting for the next round with her, or someone else like her. I was nervously keeping an eye on the dryers that were in operation in the crowded laundromat. When and if one of the dryers ever

stopped, I planned to rush over to it with my shopping basket of damp clothes. Understand, I'd been hanging around in the laundromat for thirty minutes or so with this basketful of clothes, waiting my chance. I'd already missed out on a couple of dryers —somebody'd gotten there first. I was getting frantic. As I say, I'm not sure where our kids were that afternoon. Maybe I had to pick them up from someplace, and it was getting late, and that contributed to my state of mind. I did know that even if I could get my clothes into a dryer it would still be another hour or more before the clothes would dry, and I could sack them up and home with them, back to our apartment in married-student housing. Finally a dryer came to a stop. And I was right there when it did. The clothes inside quit tumbling and lay still. In thirty seconds or so, if no one showed up to claim them, I planned to get rid of the clothes and replace them with my own. That's the law of the laundromat. But at that minute a woman came over to the dryer and opened the door. I stood there waiting. This woman put her hand into the machine and took hold of some items of clothing. But they weren't dry enough, she decided. She closed the door and put two more dimes into the machine. In a daze, I moved away with my shopping cart and went back to waiting. But I remember thinking at that moment, amid the feelings of helpless frustration that had me close to tears, that nothing —and, brother, I mean nothing—that ever happened to me on this earth could come anywhere close, could possibly be as important to me, could make as much difference, as the fact that I had two children. And that I would always have them and always find myself in this position of unrelieved responsibility and permanent distraction.

I'm talking about real **influence** now. I'm talking about the moon and the tide. But like that came to me. Like a sharp breeze when the window is thrown open. Up to that point in my life I'd gone along thinking, what exactly, I don't know, but that things would work out somehow —that everything in my life I'd hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true. I realized —what had I been thinking before? — that my life was a small change thing for the most part, chaotic, and without much light showing through. At that moment I felt —I knew — that the life I was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers I most admired. I understood writers to be people who didn't spend their Saturdays at the laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children. Sure, sure, there've been plenty of writers who have had far more serious impediments to their work, including imprisonment, blindness, the threat of torture or of death in one form or another. But knowing this was no consolation. At that moment —I swear all of this took place there in the laundromat— I could see nothing ahead but years more of this kind of responsibility and perplexity. Things would change some, but they were never really going to get better. I understood this, but could I live with it? At that moment I saw accommodations should have to be made. The sights would have to be lowered. I'd had, I realized later, an insight. But so what? What are insights? They don't help any. They just make things harder.

For years my wife and I had held to a belief that if we worked hard and tried to do the right things, the right

que el resultat dels vells hàbits d'escriure d'aquells dies. Potser continuo sense poder-me adaptar a pensar tenint per endavant llargs períodes de temps en què treballar, i a més en allò que desitjo!, sense haver-me de preocupar que algú em tregui la cadira on sec, o perquè algun dels meus fills es queixi que el sopar no és a punt quan el demana. Però vaig aprendre algunes coses entretant. Una de les coses que vaig aprendre és que m'havia de doblegar si no em volia trencar. I també vaig aprendre que és possible doblegar-se i trencar-se alhora.

Diré un parell de coses sobre dues persones més que van tenir influència en la meva vida. L'una, John Gardner, feia un curs d'iniciació per a escriptors de ficció a la Universitat Estatal de Chico quan m'hi vaig matricular a la tardor de 1958. La meva dona, els nens i jo, que fins llavors havíem viscut a Yakima, Washington, vam mudar-nos a un lloc anomenat Paradise, a Califòrnia, al peu d'uns turons, a uns setze quilòmetres de Chico. Ens havien promès un lloguer barat i, naturalment, vam pensar que seria una gran aventura anar a viure a Califòrnia (en aquell temps i fins bastant després, sempre estàvem disposats a viure alguna aventura). Evidentment, havia de treballar per mantenir la família, però també pensava entrar a la universitat com a estudiant a temps parcial.

Gardner acabava de doctorar-se en filosofia per la Universitat de Iowa, i jo sabia que havia escrit algunes novel·les i unes quantes narracions breus inèdites. No havia conegit mai algú que hagués escrit una novel·la, publicada o no. El primer dia de classe ens va fer anar a fora i ens va fer jeure a la gespa. Recordo que érem sis o set. Ens va preguntar els autors que ens agradaven. No recordo quins noms li vam dir, però no devien ser els que ell suposava que havíem d'esmentar. Va dir que pensava que cap de nosaltres no tenia el que calia per a ser un autèntic escriptor, perquè veia que no en posseíem el foc necessari. Però va afegir que faria el que podria amb nosaltres, si bé va quedar molt clar que no n'esperava grans resultats. Tanmateix s'entenia que estàvem a punt d'embarcar-nos en una travessa i calia que ens subjectéssim el barret.

Recordo que en una altra classe va dir que no faria referència a cap de les revistes de més circulació, llevat de per riure-se'n. Va dur-nos un pilot de «petites» revistes, les trimestrals literàries, i ens va dir que en llegíssim els treballs publicats. Va dir-nos que allà era on es publicava el millor del país dins dels gèneres de ficció i poesia. També ens va remarcar que ell era allà per indicar-nos els autors que havíem de llegir i per ensenyarnos a escriure. Era increïblement arrogant. Ens va donar una llista de revistes que, segons ell, valien la pena, i ens la va llegir tot fent-ne un comentari de cadascuna. Era la primera vegada que les sentia. Recordo que un dia d'aquells ens va dir, devia ser durant una conferència, que a més a més de néixer, els escriptors es feien (Serà veritat? Déu meu, encara no ho sé. Suposo que tot escriptor que es dediqui a ensenyar creació literària i es prengui la feina amb una mínima serietat ho ha de creure en certa manera. Hi ha aprenents de músic, de compositor i d'arts visuals. Per què no en podia haver d'escriptor?). En aquella època jo era molt impressionable, i suposo que ho continuo sent, però em va impactar moltíssim tot el que ens va dir

things would happen. It's not such a bad thing to try and build a life on. Hard work, goals, good intentions, loyalty, we believed these were virtues and would someday be rewarded. We dreamt when we had the time for it. But, eventually, we realized that hard work and dreams were not enough. Somewhere, In Iowa City maybe, or shortly afterwards, in Sacramento, the dreams began to go bust.

The time came and went when everything my wife and I held sacred, or considered worthy of respect, every spiritual value, crumbled away. Something terrible had happened to us. It was something that we had never seen occur in any other family. We couldn't fully comprehend what had happened. It was erosion, and we couldn't stop it. Somehow, when we weren't looking, the children had got into the driver's seat. As crazy as it sounds now, they held the reins, and the whip. We simply could not have anticipated anything like what was happening to us.

During these ferocious years of parenting, I usually didn't have the time, or the heart, to think about working on anything very lengthy. The circumstances of my life, the «**grip and slog**» of it, in D.H. Lawrence's phrase, did not permit it. The circumstances of my life with these children dictated something else. They said if I wanted to write anything, and finish it, and if ever I wanted to take satisfaction out of finished work, I was going to have to stick to stories and poems. The short things I could sit down and, with any luck, write quickly and have done with. Very early, long before Iowa City even, I'd understood that I would have a hard time writing a novel, given my anxious inability to focus on anything for a sustained period of time. Looking back on it now, I think I was slowly going nuts with frustration during those ravenous years. Anyway, these circumstances dictated, to the fullest possible extent, the forms my writing could take. God forbid, I'm not complaining now, just giving facts from a heavy and still bewildered heart.

If I'd been able to collect my thoughts and concentrate my energy on a novel, say, I was still in no position to wait for a payoff that, if it came at all, might be several years down the road. I couldn't see the road. I had to sit down and write something I could finish now, tonight, or at least tomorrow night, no later, after I got in from work and before I lost interest. In those days I always worked some crap job or another, and my wife did the same. She waitressed or else was a door-to-door saleswoman. Years later she taught high school. But that was years later. I worked sawmill jobs, janitor jobs, delivery man jobs, service station jobs, stockroom boy jobs —name it, I did it. One summer, in Arcata, California, I picked tulips, I swear, during the daylight hours, to support us; and at night after closing, I cleaned the inside of a drive-in restaurant and swept up the parking lot. Once I even considered, for a few minutes anyway —the job application form there in front of me— becoming a bill collector!

In those days I figured if I could squeeze in an hour or two a day for myself, after job and family, that was more than good enough. That was heaven itself. And I felt happy to have that hour. But sometimes, one reason or another, I couldn't get the hour. Then I would look forward to Saturday, though sometimes things happened that knocked Saturday out as well. But there was Sunday to hope for. Sunday, maybe.

I couldn't see myself working on a novel in such a

fashion, that is to say, no fashion at all. To write a novel, it seemed to me, a writer should be living in a world that makes sense, a world that the writer can believe in, draw a bead on, and then write about accurately. A world that will, for a time anyway, stay fixed in one place. Along with this there has to be a belief in the essential **correctness** of that world. A belief that the known world has reasons for existing, and is worth writing about, is not likely to go up in smoke in the process. This wasn't the case with the world I knew and was living in. My world was one that seemed to change gears and directions, along with its rules, every day. Time and again I reached the point where I couldn't see or plan any further ahead than the first of next month and gathering together enough money, by hook or by crook, to meet the rent and provide the children's school clothes. This is true.

I wanted to see tangible results for any so-called literary efforts of mine. No chits or promises, no time certificates, please. So I purposely, and by necessity, limited myself to writing things I knew I could finish in one sitting, two sittings at the most. I'm talking of a first draft now. I've always had patience for rewriting. But in those days I happily looked forward to the rewriting as it took up time which I was glad have taken up. In one regard I was in no hurry to finish the story or the poem I was working on, for finishing something meant I'd have to find the time, and the belief, to begin something else. So I had great patience with a piece of work after I'd done the initial writing. I'd keep something around the house for what seemed a very long time, fooling with it, changing this, adding that, cutting out something else.

This hit-and-miss way of writing lasted for nearly two decades. There were good times back there, of course; certain grown up pleasures and satisfactions that only parents have access to. But I'd take poison before I'd go through that time again.

The circumstances of my life are much different now, but now I **choose** to write short stories and poems. Or at least I think I do. Maybe it's all a result of the old writing habits from those days. Maybe I still can't adjust to thinking in terms of having a great swatch of time in which to work on something —anything I want!— and not have to worry about having the chair yanked out from under me, or one of my kids smarting off about why supper isn't ready on demand. But I learned some things along the way. One of the things I learned is that I had to bend or else break. And I also learned that it is possible to bend and break at the same time.

I'll say something about two other individuals who exercised influence on my life. One of them, John Gardner, was teaching a beginning fiction writing course at Chico State College when I signed up for the class in the fall of 1958. My wife and I and the children had just moved down from Yakima, Washington, to a place called Paradise, California, about ten miles up in the foothills outside of Chico. We had the promise of low-rent housing and, of course, we thought it would be a great adventure to move to California. (In those days, and for a long while after, we were always up for an adventure.) Of course, I'd have to work to earn a living for us, but I also planned to enroll in college as a part-time student.

Gardner was just out of the University of Iowa with a Ph.D. and, I knew, several unpublished novels and

i tot el que va fer. Va agafar un dels meus primers intents d'escriure un relat i me'n va anar comentant. Recordo que va tenir molta paciència, i desitjava que entengués el que m'intentava ensenyantar, i em repetia una vegada i una altra com era d'important que digués el que volia dir amb les paraules exactes. Ni vaguetats ni bunyols, ni prosa obscura. I no deixava de repetir-me la importància de fer servir —no coneix cap altra manera d'anomenar-lo— el llenguatge quotidià, el llenguatge de la relació normal, el llenguatge amb què ens comuniquem amb els altres.

Fa poc, vam sopar junts a Ithaca, Nova York, i li vaig recordar algunes de les sessions que havíem tingut al seu despatx. Em va contestar que segurament tot el que m'havia dit estava equivocat. «He canviat d'opinió sobre tantes coses!», va dir. Jo només sé que els consells que ens va donar aquells dies eren precisament els que en aquells moments necessitava. Era un professor magnífic. Va ser una gran cosa que m'ocorregué allò en aquella època de la meva vida: tenir algú que em prengués prou seriosament com per asseure's i rellegir-se amb mi un manuscrit. Sabia que m'estava passant alguna cosa molt important, alguna cosa crucial. Em va ajudar a veure com era d'important dir exactament el que volia dir sense afegir-hi res; no utilitzar paraules «literàries» o un llenguatge «pseudo-poètic». Intentava explicar-me, per exemple, la diferència entre dir «l'ala d'una alosa de prat» amb la preposició o amb el genitiu saxó. Hi ha un sentiment i una musicalitat diferents, no? La paraula «sòl» i la paraula «terra». Sòl és sòl, deia, significa sòl, brutícia, aquestes coses. Però si dius «terra» és diferent, aquesta paraula té d'altres connotacions. Em va ensenyantar a fer servir les contraccions. Em va ajudar a aprendre a dir el que volia amb el mínim de paraules. Em va fer veure que en un relat breu fins el més petit detall és important. Era important la col·locació dels punts i de les comes. Per tot això, i per allò altre —per donar-me la clau del seu despatx perquè pogués tenir un lloc on escriure els caps de setmana—, per haver-me aguantat les ximplerries i els disbarats, sempre li estaré agraït. Va ser una influència.

Deu anys després, vivint encara els meus fills a casa, escrivia de tant en tant algun poema o alguna història, en vaig enviar una a «Esquire», amb la qual cosa em pensava que aconseguiria oblidar-la durant força temps. Però aquella història em va tornar per correu juntament amb una carta de Gordon Lish, aleshores redactor de la revista. Deia que em retornava la història, no s'excusava de fer-ho, no me la retornava «sentint-ho molt», només me la retornava. Però expressava el desig de veure'n més. De manera que immediatament li vaig enviar tot el que tenia, i, amb la mateixa diligència d'abans, m'ho va retornar. Però, també com abans, els treballs que li havia enviat anaven accompanyats d'una amable carta.

En aquella època, començament dels setanta, vivia a Palo Alto amb la meva família. Tenia una mica més de trenta anys i havia aconseguit la meva primera feina d'oficina (era redactor en una editorial de llibres de text). Vivíem en una casa que tenia un garatge al darrere. Els anteriors llogaters l'havien convertit en una habitació per a jugar, i jo m'hi ficava tots els vespres que podia després de sopar i hi intentava escriure. Si no aconseguia escriure res, cosa que m'acostumava a passar, em quedava

short stories. I'd never met anyone who'd written a novel, published or otherwise. On the first day of class he marched us outside and had us sit on the lawn. There were six or seven of us, as I recall. He went around, asking us to name the authors we liked to read. I can't remember any names we mentioned, but they must not have been the right names. He announced that he didn't think any of us had what it took to become real writers—as far as he could see none of us had the necessary fire. But he said he was going to do what he could for us, though it was obvious he didn't expect much to come of it. But there was an implication too that we were about to set off on a trip, and we'd do well to hold onto our hats.

I remember at another class meeting he said he wasn't going to mention any of the big-circulation magazines except to sneer at them. He'd brought in a stack of «little» magazines, the literary quarterlies, and he told us to read the work in those magazines. He told us that this was where the best fiction in the country was being published, and all of the poetry. He said he was there to tell us which authors to read as well as teach us how to write. He was amazingly arrogant. He gave us a list of the little magazines he thought were worth something, and he went down the list with us and talked a little about each magazine. Of course, none of us had ever heard of these magazines. It was the first I'd ever known of their existence. I remember him saying during this time, it might have been during a conference, that writers were made as well as born. (Is this true? My God, I still don't know. I suppose every writer who teaches creative writing and who takes the job at all seriously has to believe this to some extent. There are apprentice musicians and composers and visual artists—so why not writers?) I was impressionable then, I suppose I still am, but I was terribly impressed with everything he said and did. He'd take one of my early efforts at a story and go over it with me. I remember him as being very patient, wanting me to understand what he was trying to show me, telling me over and over how important it was to have the right words saying what I wanted them to say. Nothing vague or blurred, no smoked-glass prose. And he kept drumming at me the importance of using—I don't know how else to say it—common language, the language of normal discourse, the language we speak to each other in.

Recently we had dinner together in Ithaca, New York, and I reminded him then of some of the sessions we'd had up in his office. He answered that probably everything he'd told me was wrong. He said, **«I've changed my mind about so many things»**. All I know is that the advice he was handing out in those days was just what I needed at the time. He was a wonderful teacher. It was a great thing to have happen to me at that period of my life, to have someone who took me seriously enough to sit down and go over a manuscript with me. I knew something crucial was happening to me, something that mattered. He helped me to see how important it was to say exactly what I wanted to say and nothing else; not to use «literary» words or «pseudo-poetic» language. He'd try to explain to me the difference between saying something like, for example, «wing of a meadow lark» and «meadow lark's wing». There's a different sound and

feel, yes? The word «ground» and the word «earth», for instance. Ground is ground, he'd say, it means ground, dirt, that kind of stuff. But if you say «earth» that's something else, that word has other ramifications. He taught me to use contractions in my writing. He helped show me how to say what I wanted to say and to use the minimum number of words to do so. He made me see that absolutely everything was important in a short story. It was of consequence where the commas and periods went. For this, for that—for his giving me the key to his office so I would have a place to write on the weekends—for his putting up with my brashness and general nonsense, I'll always be grateful. He was an influence.

Ten years later I was still alive, still living with my children, still writing an occasional story or poem. I sent one of the occasional stories to Esquire and in so doing hoped to be able to forget about it for a while. But the story came back by return mail, along with a letter from Gordon Lish at that time the fiction editor for the magazine. He said he was returning the story. He was not apologizing that he was returning it, not returning it «reluctantly», he was just returning it. But he asked to see others. So I promptly sent him everything I had, and he just as promptly sent everything back. But again a friendly letter accompanied the work I'd sent to him.

At that time, the early 1970s, I was living in Palo Alto with my family. I was in my early thirties and I had my first white-collar job—I was an editor for a textbook publishing firm. We lived in a house that had an old garage out back. The previous tenants had built a playroom in the garage, and I'd go out to his garage every night I could manage after dinner and try to write something. If I couldn't write anything, and this was often the case, I'd just sit in there for a while by myself, thankful to be away from the fracas that always seemed to be raging inside the house. But I was writing a short story that I'd called **«The Neighbors»**. I finally finished the story and sent it off to Lish. A letter came back almost immediately telling me how much he liked it, that he was changing the title to **«Neighbors»**, that he was recommending to the magazine that the story be purchased. It was purchased, it did appear, and nothing, it seemed to me, would ever be the same. Esquire soon bought another story, and then another, and so on. James Dickey became poetry editor of the magazine during this time, and he began accepting my poems for publication. In one regard, things had never seemed better. But my kids were in full cry then, like the race track crowd I can hear at this moment, and they were eating me alive. My life soon took another veering, a sharp turn, and then it came to a dead stop off on a siding. I couldn't go anywhere, couldn't back up or go forward. It was during this period that Lish collected some of my stories and gave them to McGraw-Hill, who published them. For the time being, I was still off on the siding, unable to move in any direction. If there'd once been a fire, it'd gone out.

Influences. John Gardner and Gordon Lish. They hold irredeemable notes. But my children are it. Theirs is the main influence. They were the prime movers and shapers of my life and my writing. As you can see, I'm still under their influence, though the days are relatively clear now, and the silences are right.

assegut una estona, tot sol, amb un sentiment de gratitud per trobar-me fora de l'enrenou que semblava regnar sempre a casa. Però hi vaig escriure una història breu que vaig titular «Els veïns». Un cop acabada, la vaig enviar a Lish. Al cap de poquíssim vaig rebre una carta en què em deia que li havia agradat molt, que pensava canviar el títol original pel de «Veïns», i que suggeriria a la revista que em compressin la història. Me la van comprar, es va publicar i em va semblar que ja res no tornaria a ser com abans. Aviat «Esquire» em va comprar una altra història, i encara una altra i així successivament. Un dia d'aquells, van nomenar James Dickey redactor líric de la revista i començà a acceptar-me poemes per publicar-los. En cert aspecte mai les coses no m'havien anat millor. Però els meus fills estaven en plena marxa, com la multitud de la pista de curses que sento en aquest moment, i se m'estaven menjant viu. Aviat la meva vida va fer un altre tomb, va clavar una dràstica volta i es va deturar de cop en un trencall. No podia anar enllloc: ni endavant ni endarrere. Va ser llavors quan Lish va recopilar algunes de les meves històries i les va donar a McGraw-Hill, que les publicà. De moment, jo continuava quiet al meu trencall, incapàc de moure'm en cap direcció. Si alguna vegada hi havia hagut foc, s'havia extingit.

Influències. John Gardner i Gordon Lish. Sempre els tindré un deute. Però en realitat, han estat els meus fills. La seva ha estat la principal influència. Van ser els primers motors i els modeladors de la meva vida i de la meva obra. Com poden veure, continuo sota la seva influència, tot i que ara els dies són relativament clars i amb els corresponents silencis.