

Make Haste To Live: An Afterword, Ray Bradbury

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When I was eight years old, in 1928, an incredible event occurred on the back wall outside the Academy motion picture theater in Waukegan, Illinois.

An advertising broadside, some thirty feet long and twenty feet high, dramatized Black-stone the Magician in half a dozen miraculous poses: sawing a lady in half; tied to an Arabian cannon that exploded, taking him with it; dancing a live handkerchief in midair; causing a birdcage with a live canary to vanish between his fingers; causing an elephant to . . . well, you get the idea. I must have stood there for hours, frozen with awe. I knew then that someday I must become a magician.

That's what happened, didn't it? I'm not a science fiction, fantasy, magic-realism writer of fairy tales and surrealist poems. Quicker Than the Eye may well be the best title I have ever conjured for a new collection. I pretend to do one thing, cause you to blink, and in the instant seize twenty bright silks out of a bottomless hat.

How does he do that? may well be asked. I really can't say. I don't write these stories, they write me. Which causes me to live with a boundless enthusiasm for writing and life that some misinterpret as optimism.

Nonsense. I am merely a practitioner of optimal behavior, which means behave yourself; listen to your Muses, get your work done, and enjoy the sense that you just might live forever.

I don't have to wait for inspiration.

It jolts me every morning. Just before dawn, when I would prefer to sleep in, the damned stuff speaks between my ears with my Theater of Morning voices. Yes, yes, I know, that sounds awfully artsy, and no, no, I am notpreaching some sort of Psychic Summons.

The voices exist because I stashed them there every day for a lifetime by reading, writing, and living. They accumulated and began to speak soon after high school.

In other words, I do not greet each day with a glad cry but am forced out of bed by these whispering nags, drag myself to the typewriter, and am soon awake and alive as the notion/fancy/concept quits my ears, runs down my elbows and out my fingers. Two hours later, a new story is done that, all night, hid asleep behind my medulla oblongata. That, don't you agree, is not optimism. It's behavior. Optimal.

I dare not oppose these morning voices. If I did, they would ransack my conscience all day. Besides, I am as out of control as a car off a cliff. What began as a numbed frenzy before breakfast, ends with elation at noon lunch.

How did I find these metaphors? Let me count the ways: You discover your wife is pregnant with your first child soon to be born, so you name the embryonic presence "Sascha" and converse with this increasingly bright fetus that evolves into a story that you love but no one wants. So here it is.

You wonder whatever happened to Dorian Gray's portrait. Your second thoughts grow to an outsize horror by nightfall. You upchuck this hairball into your typewriter.

Some of these stories "happened" to me. "Quicker Than the Eye" was part of a magic show I attended where, with dismay, I saw someone much like myself being made a fool of onstage.

"No News, or What Killed the Dog?" was a Victrola record I played all day every day when I was five, until the neighbors offered to break me or the record, choose.

"That Woman on the Lawn" was first a poem that then turned into a story about my mother as a young and needful woman; a topic we care to discuss only with euphemisms.

"Another Fine Mess" resulted from my writing "The Laurel and Hardy Love Affair." There had to be a sequel, because when I arrived in Ireland forty years ago, the Irish Times announced LAUREL AND HARDY, ONE TIME ONLY, IN PERSON! FOR THE IRISH ORPHANS. OLYMPIA THEATER, DUBLIN. I rushed to the theater and bought the last ticket, front row center!

The curtain rose and there they were, Stan and Ollie, doing all their old, sweet, wondrous routines. I sat with happy tears streaming down my face. Later I went backstage and stood by their dressing room door watching them greet friends. I didn't introduce myself. I just wanted to warm my hands and heart. After twenty minutes of ambience bathing, I slipped away. Thus "Another Fine Mess."

"Untererseaboat Doktor" is an example of people not hearing themselves talk. A writer friend at lunch some years back described his psychiatrist, a former submarine captain in Hitler's undersea fleet. "Holy God," I cried, "give me a pencil!" I scribbled a title and finished the tale that night. My writer friend hated me for weeks.

"Last Rites" wrote itself because I am the greatest lover of other writers, old or new, who ever lived. I have never been jealous of any writer, I only wanted to write and dream like them. That makes for an enormous list, some of them first-class ladies as well as writers first class: Willa Cather, Jessamyn West, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Weelty, and, long before her current fame, Edith Wharton.

"Last Rites" shuttles in Time to pay my respects to three of my heroes, Poe, Melville, and a third writer, nameless until the finale. It crazed me to perceive that these giants died thinking they were to be buried unknown and unread. I had to invent a Time Machine to celebrate them on their deathbeds.

Some of the stories are self-evident. "At the End of the Ninth Year" is the sort of quasi-scientific factoid we all discuss a dozen times, but neglect to write.

"The Other Highway" lies beside the main route heading north from Los Angeles. It has all but vanished under grass, bushes, trees, and avalanched soil. Here and there you can still bike it for some few hundred yards before it melts into the earth.

"Once More, Legato" spontaneously combusted one afternoon when I heard a treeful of birds orchestrating Berlioz and then Albeniz.

If you know the history of Paris during the 1870s' Commune and Haussmann, who tore it down and built it back to the wonder it is now, and if you have experienced some Los Angeles earthquakes, you' could guess the genesis of "Zaharoff/Richter Mark V." During the last High Shake, two years ago, I thought: My God, the damn fools built the city on the San Andreas Fault! My next thought: what if they built it that way on purpose?!

Two hours later, the story was cooling on the windowsill.

That's not all, but it should do.

My final advice to myself; the boy magician grown old, and you?

When your dawn theater sounds to clear your sinuses: don't delay. Jump. Those voices may be gone before you hit the shower to align your wits.

Speed is everything. The 90-mph dash to your machine is a sure cure for life rampant and death most real.

Make haste to live.

Oh, God, yes.

Live. And write. With great haste.

The end

