

Homage to J. D. Salinger

These sentences, this speaking—all I say is drawing from an inexplicable source which is entirely outside of myself, and when the reader gets this, it as if he is handed a searchlight and knows it should be trained on the heavens—or his own soul, or swept back and forth accordingly. Other writers know how to rearrange known quantities that, also, are not original to themselves; but their sources are merely copied, screened for use, learned in a strategy, absorbed by dint of seeking an identity; and even if they are prideful enough to claim a style, from the variety available, so that readers may recognize that all their books have a voice, that voice is simply career-wise. But my books are launched like rockets, immediately they go out of this world. They are synonymous with a person who has a source that speaks only to him. And not, I caution, because he is privileged; but because his source is privileged, and has targeted him as a witness. For it must speak with authority. Do not complain, I say, just listen for once. It is in the tremulous note of the highest expectation.

But why point to this difference, why not only produce these sentences? Well, because that is what happens with every thought I have, even the thought of distinguishing my craft from another's (that is craft in multiple forms . . .). Yes every inquiry and every pause turns back to glimpse where it came from, and timidly asks for support, or, in this case, boldly turns on some enemy. Explanations, skirmishes, it is they who then run alongside the first inspiration, the purely novel set of ideas that came out of nowhere. As I said. And I cannot lose with this procedure. One cannot help but produce another, and heightened, example of the very point being made, in the explanation of what the difference is between its task and another's. Theirs are delegated lives of self-aggrandizement. Mine is the creation of a road that leads to a monument in the desert, the tracking of an erasure, that then reveals a stubborn truth.

Other authors, I suppose my position is to be opposed to the whole sorry lot of them. Only out of embarrassment for a history that failed its full sentimental charge on our consciousness, could one refer to those striving novelists. Novelists? What a quaint occupation! Write a story! Make it out of assimilated life, disgorged; and let out your

own idling theories of life, in the pacing, so the neighborly reader can inoculate themselves. Books like that, are dead.

It was the week that the famous recluse writer, JD Salinger, died, and we were sitting at the kitchen table with Diane, she comes over for dinner and it's always a kind of marathon, even with just Janet and her, we create this epic mood where all things are reviewed. I steer things around, it seems like tentatively at first, and I wind up inspired, in a frenzy, talking for the ages. I probably brought JD Salinger into the conversation, we can never remember how these marathon conversations proceed exactly, of course they move through associated topics, and land, or light on a current thought, ideally focused on a current event. So the world is always an illustration, for the breakthrough in thoughts among the players at our kitchen table. It's a drama, and it seems like there is an audience, people listening in, and Theo always joins us, sometimes Roy and Sally. The way we treat the topics, they are both sweeping up, and able to lay a foundation for the future. There is a reader who will see what I mean.

Everybody, it seems to me, has heard the story about how we tried to deliver my novel **Black Forest** to JD Salinger, and how we got to his chalet on the mountaintop in Cornish, New Hampshire, and had that brief shouting match with him—the ghost himself it seemed like, not the real man, the clinging ghost of the famous author who will not brook disturbance, not have a self-imposed isolation shattered. Well! That is before he died, anyway. Now there is a shakeup, the situation different! He is a silly mortal man gone to all tomorrows' parties now! I am cackling under my breath, but speaking with a steely calm, and I know Diane has heard this story and how we have the typed letter JDS sent to Janet. But she wants to glare at it now. She is acting like she never saw this, but it is just that she hasn't seen it in light of the death of the author of it. I think it is symbolic! She hardly reveres him. Well, it just so happens I looked for that letter in my files, just yesterday, and put it in a protective plastic folder, along with other correspondence we have with literary notables.

So I trudged on upstairs to get it from my office. Once I got there I felt like staying for awhile. I could watch that basketball game which was already playing, soundless, on the television, and let the two girls talk. Girls they became when left to their own . . . unbelievable spontaneity. Although, I don't know,

there likely is some probing each others' worries, and cavilling about the latest episodes and projects in their lives, amongst these women folk too, when you leave them with their knitting—I mean their art and their gardens. Yeah, I think, and I fold my arms and sit in front of the television like one of the commentators of the basketball game. I will go back downstairs in a minute, a long minute.

Well . . . a person has certain protective strategies, I know I do in my case. I've got attitudes that allow me to ride high, and in another circumstance drop defenses utterly; but, you always have somebody you're addressing, I think—and who, I ask the both of us, isn't doing three things at once? One will answer that kind of question later. And the answer will be referring to what was earlier. Funny! I am telling you, the shifting of pronouns and tenses is making me punch drunk; the punctuation itself, in these sentences, is skittish.

It is the transition, needful and apt for both cases, to the scene waiting for me in the kitchen, which needs input, material evidence, hey!, I saved it, content on a theme which I guess I own, and right at the exact same time the decision in my thoughts as I am standing there, nowhere, in my own house, which says, go on with it, this must be exactly right. You always have to make decisions in your thoughts. How simply true is that! It almost doesn't seem to matter what they are, as long as you managed to make it serious.

What is thus reached by tortuous reflection, or choice by whim, what is thus serious in the sense of being most worked over, or contrived, seems to be exactly what the other people are waiting for, always. It is saturation in my own awareness. In life, I think, like addressing my own conscience: you actually cannot lose. Whatever that was, a vision of some loss, a studied doubt, a heralded adventure, is absorbed by the excitement awaiting in the closest arena.

Whew! So I go back downstairs delicately clutching this fragile typed letter on onion-skin paper we got from JD Salinger in 1975 . . . It's a visual aide, a conversation piece, this Salinger letter that Diane is waiting to lay eyes on. It's a special exhibit which helps the narrator immensely as he builds the story for listeners whom have heard various versions of this story before. Various versions? What! I don't mean to say the story is different each time, far from it! It is the exact same story, I mean it is a reference to the exact scene that happened in exact reality in 1975, so that should hold it in focus, for the

narrator as he strives once again to render this important tale for maximum effect on his listeners—I can’t help that aspect of the thing, fitting it into present reality, which in the best rendition would also give it meaning, I think just in time, relative to myself. Once the event that seems to have glory attached is pasted before their eyes, you back track and fill them in as to how you elbowed your way into such a position.

I kind of sit back and let ten or twelve centuries pass. Really, what goes on in my imagination is fundamentally out of control. Never quite reigned in, but in a dangerous loop, breeding fear of life itself. Or I go to the refrigerator and bring on a round of beers for outstretched hands. A well-known story can be repeated endlessly, of course, as long as the teller of it is . . . primed. And the story itself has . . . eternal merit.

It is just simply impossible to do anything directly; and also impossible to speak outside this book. In my work, emendations haunt me at the very outset. The duty of the truth is awesome and never fulfilled, but calling. When I come to the place where it seems the story itself is what you would like, I realize I assume this story is ready, like I could go back into my office and get a typescript of it. Or better yet, a videotape, like from some film archives of reality. The prospect of having to narrate it from little old memory once again, and form it into a stylized whole, again, is daunting. But not that daunting, and when Theo arrives, what I do is switch to a tone of dry, factual reportage. As if it was not I who was the duped and doomed visitor to Salinger’s chalet, not us the charming, hapless, young, dauntless couple whose failed mission produced only . . . well, that letter is what Diane is pointing to, set down, surgically, on the gleaming white kitchen table.

“Look at this, it is an actual letter from JD Salinger,” she says.

It was set there on the kitchen table, between a dinner fork and a salt shaker, a drained Coors Light a ways off. I was getting ready.

“Think I care?” he says, mischievously, glancing around. When Theo comes in, he always rearranges the perspective, and sobers up the girls. I feel I can now lecture freely and modestly, while still maintaining the optional narrating voice of the inward fiction writer—who speechifies to the invisible *fourth reader*, you see.

“Oh, yeah, you care,” I said. “It is part of my autobiography.”

Suddenly, I say, we are driving up the mountain road in our white Toyota, outside Cornish, New Hampshire, in the descending twilight of cold mid-March. It was 1975, for God's sake, but it is vivid still to this day, I guess—I mean you can put memories back together to a certain degree, like it was happening, if you are telling them. And this could be important, to redress what happened, when a tale has a hook; probably everybody else mostly just sinks into their thoughts, but let's not wonder about that. We were following Mike, the Scottish guy we met in the grocery store. Janet had gone in there first and asked if JD Salinger ever bought, say, *tunafish* there, and I came in after.

“Whoa,” Theo said, “back up.”

So I backed up to make the historical background, and the position and motives of the participants completely clear. And sufficiently dramatic. I had to simply reiterate that we were only incidentally attracted to this notion of delivering a copy of **Black Forest** to the infamously famous author, if I could put it that way, because we were driving in the vicinity, and could easily just detour on over to New Hampshire, from Vermont. The mission was selling this novel to Vermont bookstores. I was an ascendant young author, and the bright idea was to deliver my upstart masterpiece, as a gift, to the unfortunate veteran, famous for hating his own fame. He was bound to be in a bad mood, but so are a lot of people. We did not know it would turn out the way it did. We thought it might be cocktails and some phony literary talk . . . we'd leave the book on a glass table, for him to read at his leisure. “The old guy has nothing but leisure!” I found myself saying.

I always have to hurry on by these comments I make to myself about my own story. The way I write it now of course has more leeway, and levity.

All we did was drive to Cornish and go into a general store there, and Janet asked if JD Salinger ever came in.

“Who?” the cagey woman behind the counter said.

“You know, just to pick up a few things, like tuna fish, cat food, soap,” Janet says, or at least she reported that she said something like that to me, later when we had time, plenty of time, to review the whole serial catastrophe.

I poked my head up from where I was lurking, behind a rack of flashlights, and batteries for flashlights. I said, “I am an author.” Janet looked over at me like she didn't even know me. I, too, saw her again for the first time. She was dawning.

“He is an author,” she says. The lady, who is now faceless in memory, just let us go on with it.

“We just need to deliver my book to him, so if you could tell us where he lives, it would be much appreciated,” I said, looking at the floor, as if I was reading this sentence from a placard I had stored down there, or something. I was thinking, this is claustrophobic, we need somebody else in this scene.

“Bravo,” says a voice, “you kids are really something, aren’t you?” The man had an accent like he was Scottish, and he was wearing a beret and grinning. Aha! I thought, this guys is putting on an act for us! I switched into performance mode, which means my Colombo act.

“We are just confused about the directions,” I said.

“Oh, is Mr. Salinger expecting you?” said the Scotsman.

“You sound like you know him,” I said, “do you know him?”

The both of them twittered, I swear it, the both of them snorted and twittered.

“It’s this way, I dare say *we all* know him,” said the evasive tho’ effusive and now downright jaunty man in the beret and camouflage jacket, “and one thing we know about him is that he don’t want to be known.”

“Everybody knows that,” I said, and looked at Janet with a look that said, “say something!”

“We just want to give him this novel that he wrote,” she said.

“Who wrote?” they both said at once, along with some waiting customer, chiming in!

“Him,” my wife said, and pointed at me as the culprit.

“Ah,” said Mike (as we were to learn he called himself), “so you’re the culprit.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” I said. And I was thinking, if this goes on any longer it is going to look to the matronly store owner as if Mike here and us are real pals, just carrying on, like for *her* benefit.

“Name is Mike,” he said, and he nodded his head, firmly in the direction of the door—or at least I decided to interpret it that way, because what I did was follow him out. I said loudly to Janet, “buy some donuts, I’ll be outside with Mike.”

Mike was standing next to his Jeep, and lighting up a pipe. "I will tell you what," he said. But then he didn't say a word.

Typical, I thought. Then he said it again. "I will tell you what."

I just decided to look stupid.

"I am stupid," he said, "but I am going to give you kids a break. You follow me up the mountain, and I will signal you at the driveway where you should turn right. His house is way up, but that driveway goes there. If you do get to talk to him, which you won't I am sure, just don't tell him who gave directions."

I didn't even thank him; I was all business. It was all business, and right on time Janet came out of the store and I didn't even speak to her, she didn't even know what was going on until she saw I was following that Jeep and I said, "he thinks we are kids, he keeps calling us kids!"

"Are we following him?" she asks.

"All the way to Salinger's driveway," I say. And this is where all the stagehands who control the weather, and the curtains of twilight, got busy. As we followed our guide, who was driving as if he was trying to shake us, in a vehicle actually made for what had become now a narrow winding dirt road. But he wasn't trying to shake us, and after the longest time finally his tail light blinker went on, and he even slowed down—just so we wouldn't follow him further!

"Really," I said to Janet, "there is no reason why he shouldn't be pleased to have his isolation broken once in a while. I mean after all; we will talk a little bit, and it will be top-secret!" It occurred to me that it would be better if I liked his writing more than I did, but after all this was all about whether he was going to like my writing; I was clear-headed enough to see that.

"He can't mind if we just leave him **Black Forest**," my equally clear-headed sidekick wife said. "Maybe he isn't even home, and we will just leave it in the door."

"If there is a door," I said.

The wind was really howling now, raging around our little white sedan, which hardly seemed like it could grip the road and might just get caught up and knocked off the mountain. The dusk was taking the landscape to pieces, it seemed to be snatching trees from the right and left, and I was seized with a fear that our car would just stop

before we reached . . . anywhere. There was no color anymore, and that lack of color turned suddenly into a very large white garage door, smack in front of us. At this point, beyond the wind, I heard a dog barking. Above the garage door was a chalet style house to which there was entrance, no side path to it, no steps.

We got out of the car and stood there on either side of it, looking up to where there was a porch with a railing, and behind that full length windows, behind which, immediately, a man stood up and peered out. I thought, he can't see us. And I was about to say, "he can't see us," though it felt like I couldn't say anything, as the wind was choking me.

Then suddenly this figure in the window was outside on the porch. He must have slid aside some glass doors, or walked through these glass doors. I don't mean to be cute. He was dressed in a white shirt, open collar, dark slacks. He just spoke in the most angry stage voice. Not with much authority, but with pluck, he said:

"Who are you? And what do you want?"

This was easy. I said, "I am a *novelist*." But that didn't seem to make an impression, in fact I wasn't sure he even heard me. So I cupped my hands to my mouth and, pronouncing each word, I shouted:

"And I . . . have come . . . to bring . . . you . . . a novel!"

At which point Janet's arm shot up in the air holding the book. And there we stood on either side of our car. Case stated, and exhibit shown. Triumphant.

J.D. Salinger came alive. He leaned over, and his large hands gripped the railing on the porch; he was above us, not far away, but there was no getting to him, this was clear. He was the vaguest personage, and his reply to my overly earnest entreaty was simply killing.

"I already have a novel, *thank* you," he said.

He said that quietly— for *he* didn't have to shout against the March winds and the barking dog. In fact it was like he extended his neck, cartoon like, and whispered it in my ear.

"I already have a novel, thank you." That was good, you have to admit it.

It was we who were out of kilter, on the rim of the world, off schedule. And this scene just closed down. The witty, though doomed, author went back in his chalet. I have pretty much told this story this same way ever since, sometimes audiences are more

interested in mulling over the skimpy information given on Salinger, and sometimes people want to know what I think, or thought at the time, or think since. The sad author, I say—I always have one or two choice adjectives for the man—after all, he just disintegrated in my sight, and we got back in the car. I was shaking, but careful not to ram into the garage door in what became a super arduous effort to turn the car around. I then drove us wildly down the mountain, though sometimes it seemed we were driving up the mountain, stopping at three different houses to ask directions to the nearest motel. One friendly couple out of a Grimm’s Fairy Tale actually invited us to stay for the night, but this seemed like a terrifying offer, and motivated me to . . . *get back to reality*.

What happened is we got to a motel and Janet wrote him a letter, apologizing for barging in on him so suddenly, but, she said, “we just wanted to get you this book..” The next day we found that Country Store, it was like five minutes away!, and managed to convince the, still silent, proprietor to give her most famous customer a package containing my novel, and this letter to him. And she did give it to him, for two weeks later we got my book back in the mail, looking new and uncracked, unread!, I must say. (This will be the last of my italics; it was an homage to JDS).

But along with it there was quite the poignant letter from the old bastard (I always call him an “old bastard” precisely here in the story). It reads:

Dear Mrs. Williams,

My apologies, but for reasons that seem to me, at least, rather passably sane and fair, I’ve found it best, by far, not to read scripts or books that come in the mail. Years and years ago, I did have a short go at responding to gestures of the kind, but it led to complications that I couldn’t manage. JDS

“Need we point out,” I sometimes say, “that this book was not originally sent in the mail, but offered to him in person!”

“How infuriating,” says the very sympathetic Diane.

“Well, the old bastard is dead now,” adds unsympathetic Theo.
