

FROM WHERE YOU DREAM; THE PROCESS OF WRITING FICTION

By Robert Olen Butler

Chapter 2 THE ZONE

“All good novelists have bad memories.” —Graham Greene

The great British novelist Graham Greene said that all good novelists have bad memories. What you remember comes out as journalism. What you forget goes into the compost of the imagination. I want you to remember that Graham Greene quotation—though in fact it’s a paraphrase because I can’t remember the quote—because in a compost heap, things decompose. Your past is full of stories that have been composed in a certain way; that’s what memories are. But only when they decompose are you able to recompose them into new works of art.

You can see where I’m going. Greene’s compost of the imagination is the same as the dreamspace, the white-hot center of the unconscious. The point he’s making is that not only is your mind the enemy, not only is your will, your rational thinking, your analytic thinking the enemy, but your literal memories are also the enemy. How many times have you heard a short story criticized and heard the author say, *That’s the way it happened. It can’t be unreal because it happened that way.*

But a work of art is an organic thing. Every detail must organically resonate with every other detail. If you have an intransigent literal memory—and intransigent is what literal memories are—it sits in the middle of the organic object; it destroys everything around it. Everything in a work must remain malleable, everything must remain negotiable. You need to understand that working from your literal memory will keep you out of your unconscious, out of the zone you must enter.

I’m going to give you some practical suggestions on how to get into your zone or dreamspace. The first of those suggestions is, in fact, more than merely practical; it is rooted in the psychology of creation. Once you are engaged in writing a piece of fiction from your unconscious, it is crucial that you write every day, because the nature of this place where you go is such that it’s very difficult to find your way in. It’s pure torture. But even though it’s terrible getting in, once you’re in, if you keep going back every day, though it’s still always daunting and difficult and scary, it’s not nearly so much so. You may find—this is dangerous, but you may find—that you can take a day off every six or seven days. When you do, you’ll be grumpy and out of sorts and things will be uncomfortable, but after a day you can go back in. But you take two days off and you’re on very thin ice. If you let three or four days go by it’s as if you’ve never written a word in your entire life. That doorway closes and seals itself up; you don’t even know what part of the wall that door’s in anymore. I don’t care how much you’ve written in your life; those defenses are strong and they won’t let you go there.

You may not be ready to write yet, but when you’re in a project you must write every day. You cannot write just on weekends. You cannot write this week and not next; you can’t wait for the summer to write. You can’t skip the summer and wait till the fall. You have to write every day. You cannot do it any other way. Have I said this strongly enough?

There are no excuses not to write. At some point in my life, for various personal reasons, the only opportunity I had to write was on the Long Island Rail Road as I commuted from my home in Long Island to a job as editor-in-chief of a business newspaper in Manhattan. This was before laptop computers. I

wrote every word of my first four published novels on my lap, on legal pads, by hand, on the Long Island Rail Road, where the air-conditioning never worked in the summer, and the heat never worked in the winter, and it was always jam-packed, and people were flapping their papers and yakking and killing each other over the wrong bridge bid three seats up in front of me.

But eventually a thing kicked in that psychologists used to call *functional fixedness*. That is, if you have a certain place and certain objects that you associate only with a certain task, eventually the associational values build up in such a way that when you go to that place and engage those objects, you are instantly completely focused on that task. So getting over the hump of distraction with those

railroad trips eventually became an asset, because writing was all I ever did on the train; I did nothing else. And I began to write well. I wrote my

first four published novels on that train. So here's one of those practical suggestions for getting into the zone. Find a place and some objects that you go to and engage only when you're writing fiction. If you have only one space and one computer that you must use for all written things, then change the type font you use for your fiction or the color of your screen.

By the way, I finally got a teaching job that took me off the train. I got my Ph.D. at the "University of Knopf"—that is, I accumulated enough publishing credits to get a university teaching job—and I went to McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I was halfway through my fifth novel—it was already under contract to Knopf and my editor loved the first half and I did too—and I had to stop writing to drive my furniture across the country in a U-Haul, finish buying a house, and move in. I stopped writing for eight weeks. And when I returned to the novel, though I knew those characters as well as any real person I've ever known, and though I knew what was going to happen next in the plot, it was utter agony to return to the work. It took eight weeks of daily torture to write another sentence—because I'd stopped writing every day. Also, if you develop functional fixedness to help you, you can't then let it be an excuse not to write. If you are away from the conditions you've established, you must still write every day. For a while I blamed my not writing on the fact that the room wasn't moving. I thought I was going to have to buy a little motor and stick it on

my chair to jiggle it. Maybe buy choo-choo sounds for my record player. But of course the real problem was the broken link to my unconscious caused by putting the work aside for a time. Another practical way to facilitate your entry into your writing zone is to turn yourself into a morning person. If you arrange your life so that you can spend two hours writing—or an hour, given the exigencies of some working lives, but ideally a couple of hours—you make that time sacrosanct at the beginning of the day. If you need coffee, you put your coffee on a timer, you roll out of bed, you grab that cup of coffee, and you are at your computer keyboard only moments from a literal dreamspace.

Finding a way to clear your sensibility of abstract uses of language is important to get into the trance. The problem is that we naturally use language in so many nonsensual ways all through the day. I find it helpful, then, to buffer those hours in which you necessarily use language in those analytical ways from the hours in which you dive into your unconscious and seek language in quite another way. One obvious way to do that is to put your night's sleep in between. You go into your writing space straight from another dream state and go to language before you've had a chance for all those other uses of language to intrude on you. So after you wake up, don't read the newspaper, don't watch CNN;

if you have to pee don't pick up the back issue of *The New Yorker* in the basket nearby. You go to your fiction writing without letting *any* conceptual language

into your head.

I almost always write to music, and that might be helpful to some of you. I've almost never written any fiction without carefully chosen music, usually classical or jazz, almost always without words—I've been known to write to Puccini, though if I understood Italian I probably couldn't. But whatever helps you go into your trance state—whether quiet is right or music helps—in any case, you do need to be visiting your unconscious every day.

The crucial awareness you must keep is this: do not will the work. Do not write until it's coming from your unconscious. If you have the itch to write before inspiration has visited you, spend that time meditating in your unconscious. That said, there is a type of journaling that I could recommend, especially at this stage of your development. Most journaling is counterproductive. Most journals are repositories of great swatches of abstraction and generalization and self-analysis and interpretation and all that bad stuff. Don't do that. But here's a certain kind of journal that might be useful to you: at the end of the day or beginning of the next day, return to some event of the day that evoked an *emotion* in you. Record that event in the journal. But do this only—*only*—moment to moment through the senses. Absolutely never name an emotion; never start explaining or analyzing or interpreting an emotion. Record only through those five ways I mentioned that we feel emotions—signals inside

the body, signals outside the body, flashes of the past, flashes of the future, sensual selectivity—which are therefore the best ways to express emotions. Such a journal entry will read like a passage in a novel, like the most intense moment-to-moment scene in a novel. And that's all that will be there.

Fully developed in the moment.

If you write in your journal every day in this way, and if you spend forty-five minutes or an hour at it, it will be so intensive that you might not get through the whole incident. That's fine. Just break it off, don't try to summarize or bring it to the end. Next day you might pick it up again. Or not. Go for some other piece of another emotional event. And don't rely so heavily on the sense reactions within your body that when you read this fifteen years from now all you get is "palpitating heart" and "sweating palms" and "blurry vision," which could be reactions to anything. This should be rendered as if it were a scene, with all the external and internal events.

After you've got a couple of weeks' worth of these entries, the entry of two weeks ago will have had a chance to cool off. From then on, each day's journaling should have two parts to it. First, write a new entry. Then, when you've finished, go back and read the journal entry of two weeks ago, and with a marker pen slash through all the examples of abstraction, generalization, summary, analysis, and interpretation you see in the text, leaving only moment-to-moment

sense-based events and impressions. No matter how much you intended to write "in the moment," I promise you those old habits will have come back, but the hope is that, over the course of time, the red marks will diminish.

Even if you're doing a sense-based journal, you're going to have serious trouble between your creative projects. This is when you'll understand why the need to write every day runs so deep. When I've

finished a work, and some time passes, and I'm working up to something new, I feel that I am utterly wasting my life. I do trivial, ghastly, quotidian stuff; I hate myself; I complain about myself to my wife, and that hatred daily increases. Finally she says to me, "Honey, it's OK, you've now reached total self-loathing; you're about to start writing." She's always right. Soon thereafter, the door opens up to my unconscious, to my new work, and I leap in. And then I write every day and I am scared every day and I am happy every day.

A word about writer's block here. I think writer's block probably suggests that you have an artist's instinct. Bad writers never get blocked. Writers who write from their heads and are comfortable doing that—they always have some garbage to put down. I talked last week about the flow of metathinking, metaspeaking your mind. That stuff's always there and it's easy to put it on the page. I think most writers who get blocked do so because some important part of them knows that they've got to get to the unconscious. But they're not getting there;

they're thinking too much, so there's nothing there. Except it's not quite nothing—you sit there thinking, fussing, and worrying: "Gee, I'm not writing," "I've got to write now and I'm not writing," "Oh my God, I'm not writing," "If I want to be a writer I've got to write and I'm not writing." I think writer's block of that sort is the most common kind among writers who have any talent.

Writer's block is very similar to insomnia. What happens in insomnia? You lie down, intending to go into your dream-space, literally; into the depths of your unconscious, where you totally lose touch with the outer world. That's what sleep is. But you can't do it. Why? Because you can't turn your mind off. You lie there thinking about things. And if there are images, it's only because you're carefully controlling them. You sometimes have a kind of daydream going on, but you're in charge of it. You're making it happen, and you get upset about this and you think about that and you argue about this, and all the time there's this "Gee, I still am not sleeping, am I?" and, "OK, there's my mother. Gee, I'm thinking about her. I don't want to think about my mother, she makes me mad. What would I say to her if she called right now? I'd tell her ..." That's what's going on in your head, right?

What happens when you finally do fall asleep? Suddenly an image comes out of nowhere: a rainy street, a street lamp, a dog barking. Whoa, where did that come from? Nowhere. And at the moment that image comes, if you ask, "Well, where *did* that come from?" — it's gone; nothing will follow and you've got thirty-five more minutes of being awake.

Those of you who *don't* have trouble with insomnia, think about how you go to sleep. You lie down and all that garbage just turns off. Suddenly an image comes, and another, and boy, then you're gone. And that's how you write.

It's a funny state. It's not as if you're falling asleep at your computer, but neither are you brainstorming. You're *dreamstorming*, inviting the images of moment-to-moment experience through your unconscious. It's very much like an intensive daydream, but a daydream that you are and are not controlling. You let it go, but it's coming through language that you're putting on a screen, so there is some intervention on your part, and yet the essence of it—that rainy street and that dog barking and the lamplight—are nothing you're going after consciously. The state of communion with your unconscious—the zone I'm trying to describe—is absolutely essential, *absolutely essential* to writing well in this art form.

Where does language come into this very-hard-to-describe, mystical sort of place—what I’m calling your unconscious—when you create a work of art? When I talk about the place of language in this process, it’s another way to speak of voice. *Voice is the embodiment in language of the contents of your*

unconscious. When you turn off that flow of garbage in your head, you’re turning off certain kinds of words—you’re turning off abstract and analytical metawords. What then takes their place is a very strong presence of language, but it’s almost misleading to call it language because language is so often used in those ways that mean analysis, abstraction. That’s why I say voice. The presence of words—which you quickly capture and string together and massage—is intimately bound up with that sensual imagery in your unconscious, which makes up your voice and the voices of your characters.

The line-to-line words come from your unconscious and so does the very form in which you write. You do not know whether you’re a novelist or a short story writer. You don’t choose ahead of time to be a novelist and then look around in yourself and figure out what novels you’ve got there. You have a vision of the world and that vision has a natural form; you don’t know what will turn out to be the natural form of your vision. You’ve probably had the experience of writing a short story that just kind of takes off. It’s not a very good story, because what you’re seeing really wants to be a novel. Or you sit down trying to write a novel and you poop out at about page 40. That happens because you are forcing your vision into a predetermined medium, and that’s not the way it should work.

The distinction between the vision that becomes a novel and the vision that becomes a short story is pretty much like this (I’m going to describe these differences metaphorically; I am not advocating a consciousness of your audience): the short story will have you say to the reader, “Look, I don’t have much time. So sit down, let me tell you about a moment in this character’s life when something took a turn, or something intensified in some significant way.” The short story will have, oftentimes, a brief sequence of causally linked events, but ultimately it turns *on the moment*.

The novel is going to be saying to your reader, “Look, this is going to take some time. Let’s go for a long walk, and I want to tell you about all these things that happened in the life of this character in my unconscious; all these things that happened to him, which somehow fit together, are somehow causally linked.” In a novel, there will be many revealing moments but ultimately the focus of a novel is on that—I won’t call it a chain, because that argues for a certain kind of linear structure, but—that certain configuration of causally linked events. That’s the focus of a novel.

Oftentimes I’ve found that my novels come out of the wedding of two separate visions that seemed to be two different novels, two books that really weren’t working and seemed quite different from each other. (I’ve got a number of potential novels and stories running around in my unconscious at any given meditative moment.)

Let me go back to one of those really god-awful novels that never saw the light of day, my first Vietnam-based novel, called *What Lies Near*. It was about a guy in military intelligence who visits the holding cell in an interrogation camp for suspected Viet Cong. He goes into a cell vacated by a prisoner who’s been tortured and taken somewhere else, and he finds a piece of graffiti written on the wall. The novel I wrote was just straight out of literal memory stuff. As a military intelligence agent, I had gone to an interrogation center run by the ARVNs—the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, which is South Vietnamese— and there was a cell where they kept the Viet Cong prisoners while they tortured them—horribly, as the South Vietnamese often did. I went in the cell and— these are the tropics; it was a

hundred degrees and 95 percent humidity outside this windowless space about six feet square, which had an iron door with a little plate kept shut and a stone ledge for sleeping and a hole in the floor—I stepped in and instantly broke into a heavy sweat from the closeness of the air and the foul smells from the hole in the floor, and the walls were stained with lichen, and I was ready to turn and flee.

But—I don't know what made me think of this—I wondered about graffiti. Was there some trace of the people left behind? I looked at the walls, and there were obviously some places that had been scratched—the scratchings then obliterated by the caretakers of the place. Very carefully monitored. There was nothing else to see, and I was about to leave when I noticed a little wooden

stand against one wall. I thought, well, if somebody wanted to put some graffiti where it would survive scrutiny, he'd put it behind that. So I pulled that stand away from the wall and suddenly heard the frantic rustle of brittle little feet, and dozens of three-inch cockroaches scattered from behind this thing—just that last turn of the horror of the place: these people are kept in darkness with roaches crawling all over, waiting to be tortured—and, sure enough, there was a piece of graffiti scratched into the wall behind the wooden stand.

It read, “*Vệ siuh là khoé,*” which means, “Hygiene is healthful.”

Suddenly I was in the presence of this remarkable mind. To have that kind of irony, that kind of detachment!

Well, I wrote the terrible novel called *What Lies Near*, in which the agent finds this graffiti and then spends the rest of the novel trying to track down the guy who wrote it. I myself didn't try to track him down; the novel was driven by what had happened there, in that cell, and I was just sort of tunnel-visioned onto it. It was slavish to what really happened, and that was not enough to sustain a novel. It was not a novel.

In 1983, ten years after the failure of *What Lies Near*, I had found my way into my unconscious and just published *Countrymen of Bones*. I began my fourth novel and moved from the fine but rather obscure independent company,

Horizon Press, to Knopf. In those ten years, I'd had another notion for a novel—let's face it, it was an *idea*; that's why it was not going anywhere—based on the fact that my son had been born and looked just like me—a little externalization of self. I wrote an awful short story about it—but one that led me to consider how American army men went to Vietnam for a year: you drop into war, and they pluck you out again. There were legions of Vietnamese women in the gray area between prostitute and aspiring girlfriend, and they didn't understand birth control or didn't give a damn, so there were a lot of children born of fleeting connections—“children of the dust.” There were men who lived for thirty years in America not knowing that they had a child, now an adult somewhere in the world. They would go to their graves probably not giving it a thought, and certainly not knowing that they had a part of themselves in the world. Still, that's not enough for a novel. And it was a bad short story.

Actually twelve years had passed since I was in Vietnam—and now two separate things that had gotten me to meditate there, the prisoner and the child, suddenly came together in my unconscious. Only when those things

converged was there the fullness of a novel. *On Distant Ground* is about an army intelligence captain

being tried in a court martial for having tracked down and set free a Viet Cong prisoner—prompted to do so by seeing graffiti written on a wall. His yearning is for a connection with the other, and this yearning has been intensified by a son who looks just like him, though he is a man of inherent

emotional distance and aloofness toward everyone around him including his wife. During the trial he becomes obsessed with the memory of a Vietnamese woman who mysteriously broke off their affair, and he wonders if he may be one of those people unknowingly with a child in Vietnam. He goes back—he's on bail—to Saigon. The city falls while he's there, and he's trapped in Communist Vietnam, looking for a child who may not exist.

To choose the novel or short story form without it being driven by a vision from your unconscious is a big mistake. If you are to propel your work without some willed preconception, then nothing must be preconceived, including the form, the content, and especially memories of the events of your life that produced the inspiration. You will get legitimate artistic inspiration from your unconscious, and often part of you will know where it came from. But then you have to resist going back, finding all the old notes, and working out what really happened in the past.

Be alert to the fact that you must achieve a trancelike state in order to write from your unconscious. You'll also have to know what to look for in the stuff that's coming off of the tips of your fingers. You can see the bad stuff going up on the screen; you know where it's coming from. You don't just let yourself get away with it.

And, of course, writing is also rewriting. I need to say a final word now on the question of editing and rewriting: you might say to yourself, OK, that's fine, all that white-hot-center stuff spilling out in the composition, but when I go back to edit and revise, how do the dreams fit in there? Or do they?

They absolutely do. What you need to do now is to think of yourself as a reader encountering a strange work. You've got to understand your own memory and figure out what it takes for you to forget what you have written, sufficiently that you can revisit it as reader. That's the key to editing yourself. This is where having a bad memory will serve you well. If you reread your work without having forgotten it, you'll be analyzing your own work in all those lit-crit ways. I'm lucky. I literally forget my sentences after I've written them. I will write a sentence; I'll write another; I'll go back and read the previous sentence, and I won't know where the hell it came from.

I'll have more to say about reading a little later, but the essence is this: the primary and only necessary way of experiencing a work of literary art is not

by "understanding" it in analytical terms; it is by *thrumming* to the work of art. Like the string of a stringed instrument you vibrate inside, a harmonic is set up.

So to edit your work, you go back and thrum to it. And you go *thrum, thrum, thrum, twang!* And when you go *twang!* as a reader, mark that passage. And you thrum on and twang on and thrum and twang and thrum and twang. Then you go back

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to the twangs and instead of looking at the twangy spots and analyzing them in lit-crit ways, instead of consciously and wilfully applying what you understand with your mind about craft and techniques, you *redream* those passages.

Rewriting is redreaming. Rewriting is redreaming till it all thrums.

Let me return to Graham Greene. The compost heap of the novelist, the repository that exists apart from literal memory, apart from the conscious mind, is mostly made up of direct, sensual life experience. But it is also the proper place for all the fiction craft and technique that you properly and necessarily consciously learned. It is also the proper place for all the wonderful fiction you've read. All of these things must first be forgotten—at least while you are in your creative trance—before they can be authentically engaged in the creation of a work of art.