

Time and the Theatre

2017

A play is a story that happens. It's here—this moment, this accretion of moments onstage—before it's gone.

I prefer 'moments' because rarely do we retain a play's words, no matter how lyrically or pithily or wittily they've been uttered. We revel in, hold on to, and sometimes carry with us these moments that moved us—out of ourselves and into the present.

Many years ago, though not so many years, I sat in a room and listened to a writer speak. I considered him old; I was not yet thirty. The writer was Barry Hannah, and he was somewhere in his sixties—an age far, far over my horizon. He was meant to deliver a lecture about the craft of writing fiction. As far as I can remember, he spoke mostly of his recent treatment for colon cancer. I can still see him: the casual way he sat sidelong in his chair in a toppled column of sunlight, describing for us all the morning when he woke to a vision of Jesus at the foot of his hospital bed.

I can't quote a word of the lecture. What I remember was how that day, those moments, shook me deeply. Made me feel embarrassed—for what? For him? Me? I was awake. I

was scared. I wondered, Is this a craft lecture? Now I know it was.

About eighteen months ago, six months after my wife had been diagnosed with stage 2B breast cancer, I was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer with metastasis to the liver. Luckily—I want to say miraculously—the metastasis consisted of two small lesions located in a resectable portion of my liver. I was given a very small chance for survival, smaller for a cure, but they actually used the word ‘cure’ (medically speaking one is not considered cured until ten years have passed without recurrence). My liver surgeon remarked offhand that a few years ago I would have had, at most, six months to live.

First, they removed seven inches of my descending colon, then somehow stitched me back together without the need for a colostomy bag. They took 10 percent of my bladder for safe measure. Then I received four months of intensive chemotherapy; they ‘hit me with everything’, as my oncologist liked to phrase it, because I was relatively young and could withstand it. Then my liver was resected, only about 15 percent of it, as the chemotherapy had shrunk those two lesions considerably, reducing the smaller tumor to just a smudge of scar tissue. They nipped out my gallbladder—again, just to be safe. Then two more months of chemo. My treatment, as had been promised, was over by Christmas.

According to recent scans and blood tests, I currently possess ‘no evidence of disease’, or NED, a term that has more or less replaced the apparently out-of-vogue ‘remission’, which is fine with me as the latter has always implied a mere respite from the disease anyway.

Chris Shinn is a playwright about my age. He is currently NED after not one but two bouts of Ewing’s sarcoma, a cancer usually afflicting children. When I reached out to him after my diagnosis for some sort of solace—advice, maybe—he said, among other things, ‘Bet on yourself.’ And why not? We are playwrights after all; we’re accustomed to thinking, Perhaps my next play will be a hit, win a prize, move to Broadway or the West End, or at least move somebody deeply.

But I’m realistic too. ‘No evidence’ means simply no evidence now, which is of course all we always have.

Physicists, philosophers, and my Hollywood psychic will tell you: only this moment exists. Easy for them to say; we don’t know what ‘now’ is. William James defined it as the ‘short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible’. I read somewhere that the present moment is twenty-five syllables long: a respectable sentence. Dramaturgically speaking, the now is probably what theatre folk refer to as a ‘beat’.

A beat is a unit of action. One beat begins when (and where, on the page) the previous beat ends. This juncture is change, and change is what keeps the audience awake. Change crackles, casts light, smolders, fizzles—explodes.

When I was six years old, my father raised a glass of cheap champagne as midnight approached on New Year’s Eve and bellowed, ‘Say goodbye to the ’70s!’ I fell to pieces sobbing. He took pity on me (this is maybe my only memory of him loving me) and whisked me off to bed, where he read me

The Sorcerer's Apprentice, just as the '80s came slithering in.

Like everybody, I presume, I have experienced a lifelong terror of time. Its loss. This is why, I am sure, I write plays, an activity in which I can control, at least in my imagination, the passage of time and, more importantly, what change it contains.

I remember learning as if it were a Masonic secret that a page of script in 'standard playwriting format' works out to about a minute of stage time. Ninety pages runs ninety minutes. Infinite time and space, bound within this wooden, highly flammable rectangle of paper. As the Buddha might as well have said: 'O for a muse of fire.'

Because plays are temporal and fleeting, usually they are disposable.

As a student I could be glib about this, and pompous too. The theatre's perishability was a major draw point in its favor, an almost sacred characteristic that contrasted mightily with the tawdry mercantilism of film and TV. Literature too. Film and video and paper degrade in time too, but theatre like prayer is magic.

You can buy plays, but not many, as it takes a critically and commercially successful production to ensure a script's publication (most play publishers make their money from licensing performances anyway, not selling books). And plays are painful to read by design, as they require so much of our imagination. Plays have to be seen to be believed.

Because an extraordinary play happens purely in the present, watching it—and performing it—is an experience of both joy and sorrow. And I don't mean simply those

comic and tragic masks: I mean the joy I felt as a young actor, standing offstage waiting to step into the light. I'd been a shy child, though for some reason my family and friends thought otherwise (I was a good actor). I was drawn to the stage precisely because I was terrified—to stand, to move, to speak in front of an audience. I wanted to prove to myself that I was somebody other than who I was. Backstage with my nose to the black velvet, heart pounding, mouth parching, I'd soothe myself, intoning in a whisper like an incantation: 'You're alive, you're alive, you're alive . . .' till I heard my cue and made my entrance.

If this feeling of pure presence is not joy, then I don't know what is.

Regarding the sorrow of the theatrical now: well, these moments of joy have to end. And some plays and productions are bad, or good but hard. And there is grief in the days and weeks after the closing performance. Relief too. Not unlike a life.

Plays are shaped out of the mystery of empathy. The playwright's joy is the actors' joy is the audience's joy; that's how things are meant to unfold. All those other emotions too. But joy foremost—in the awareness, however conscious, of our privilege to inhabit this moment together in a theater, however grand, or some dusty black box somewhere—doesn't matter—sharing our individual allotments of time with a story that is happening right now, right before our eyes. The actors are here, with us, spitting and aching, sweating and straining and sometimes transcending. The theatre is sacrifice: these tickets were expensive; the

actors—and the playwright—are being paid practically nothing.

I have heard Paula Vogel say that as she matured she realized that concision in her plays was important because our days are numbered; what an honor (and responsibility) it is for the playwright that an audience is giving not minutes but hours of their lives, and asking the play to fill it with meaning. And not wasting time means for the playwright not wasting time on the page with repetitions and redundancies and tangents. Everything in a play should happen for the first and last time.

There's an old backstage joke about old audiences that any given performance could be their last. But it's the same predicament for everybody, regardless of their age. So, again, let's cut to the chase.

And speaking of counting: some say each of us has a certain number of heartbeats, cranked inside us like a clock. Others, the optimists, and I count myself in this camp, say that we will enjoy more beats the more we use our hearts. So, playwrights: give us more life—give us a thrill. Which means thrill yourself while writing. You are your first audience, and sometimes, alas, your only audience.

As for young people: a bad play—boring, cloying, cringe—might very well keep them from darkening a theater's door for the rest of their days. So, for art's sake, think of the children.

My longtime (but still quite youthful) agent Beth Bickers asked me recently, 'What will we do when all the Boomers are dead?' I think about this question frequently; I share it with you ambivalently. How I've longed for audiences of

my own generation, those more likely to understand me, to share my confusions if nothing else. Every playwright knows that Saturday night's standing ovation unfailingly precedes the Sunday matinee's chorus of snoring and squealing hearing-aid feedback. (As an aside: be skeptical of the popular young playwrights. Many are metaphorically tap-dancing at the old folks' home.)

But if you are efficient and precise with your porous dialogue, the escalating action of your personal conflicts, your ever more revealing disclosures of character, the resonances and complexities of your unfolding themes, your audience—of all ages—will neither get ahead of you nor fall behind; thinking neither of their future ('When is this thing over?') nor their past ('Why did I say that at dinner?').

Like Samuel Beckett, like Caryl Churchill, your plays may get shorter the longer you write; likewise each play you write will shrink—'coalesce' or 'cohere' is probably better—from first to last draft. My plays tend to expand and contract with each successive draft, as if a breathing organism, until the text is 'set,' or beyond my control, ready to be inhabited and interpreted by the speech and breath and actions of the actors on opening night and for as long as the production may last.

When I was younger I wrote plays that tried to include everything. I suppose this was a Shakespearean ambition. But there's a reason the maximalist James Joyce wrote only one (not very good) play. Or as Pound said of his *Cantos*, 'I picked out this and that thing that interested me, and then jumbled them into a bag. But that's not the way to make a work of art.'

The more I write the less I include. I keep only what feels necessary, potent, dangerous; often what comes to feel destined if not obvious. I think, ‘Why didn’t I think of that before?’ I try to ignore my notes and, frankly, the notes of most everybody else. Things that occur to me when I’m not writing will most likely not be useful to me when I am writing.

My first ‘finished’ draft (number fifty? sixty?) is almost always a third too long, maybe longer. But day by day, beat by beat, I learn what doesn’t belong. What is, again, repetitious or superfluous. This has little to do with short attention spans. This is how a story happens.

This is also why unfavorable theatre reviews, in print and in conversation, are often hostile if not abusive: we feel our time’s been wasted. Our time on this earth is, after all—and I say this personally, passionately now—precious.

This is why audiences riot in the theater. Perhaps I’m mistaken, but do readers riot over novels and poems? Not so often, I’d wager. But if booing and affronted exiting can be considered riotous then such behavior happens all the time in the theatre; I saw Harold Pinter walk out of a Neil LaBute premiere (he found the music oppressive). If I may humbly brag: Alan Rickman slept through most of a play of mine.

When you or a loved one are gravely ill, you can’t help but feel that now is undeniably and inescapably now. Nothing matters aside from doing everything you can, and then some, to keep her alive, to keep yourself alive—now into your shared, uncertain future . . .

You can’t help but take things one day at a time, as they say in recovery. As I suppose I am—or hope I am—recovering. One moment. One beat at a time.

When one is gravely ill, anything can happen, and often does. In a play, anything can and always does. Must happen. Every moment a potential calamity. We’ve all seen an actor go up on her lines. Disaster is beautiful. You can hear a pin drop.

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Writers are fond of advising: ‘Write as if you are dying.’ The threat of death is meant to clarify.

This approach sounds well and good, but I’m here to confirm that it’s difficult to do; I mean, writing this way isn’t exactly fun. It’s joyful, it’s sorrowful. Often frightening. What did Rilke say? ‘Every angel is terrifying.’

Nobody truly wants to write a play for an audience of the living when one is possibly not going to be around to watch it with them. I want to hear your applause. I want to sit on the aisle in the back row or up in the balcony (or ‘the gods’, as they used to say) and watch my play ‘work’—move you and wake you to the present moment of my story, the way my story as I wrote it woke me to the present moments of my life.

Writers advise you to write this way, with the skull upon your desk, if you will, because you may, in such a state, through such a frame of mind, write with your eyes wide open. Within reason. Human beings can only bear so much wakefulness. That’s why an artful theatre makes

no money, and TV and podcasts are so easily our sleep aids.

My friend Paul Watson, a recently retired war reporter, has been telling me for years now some version of how ‘it bugs me to the core that people don’t notice how quickly we die. Whether we’re driving home from work, or sunbathing on a beach in Phuket, and a wave comes in and just keeps on coming . . .’

Or this: a friend of a friend was honeymooning not too long ago; it was the day after the wedding, and he was driving with his new wife when a spider crawled onto his shoulder, causing him to swerve minutely into an oncoming bus. The bride somehow survived.

One must write while awake to life, to death, in a state of barely controlled terror, but more importantly one’s characters should be terrified too. They should fear for their lives.

A life, like art, is subjective. I’m paraphrasing Chekhov when he said: ‘I want to write plays where people are sharing a civilized meal, and one person’s life is coming together while another’s is falling apart.’

‘The graceful adventure of conversation’ is how I remember Borges—definitely not a playwright—putting it.

Terror lies in the eye of the beholder, so one must frighten oneself first, must ‘write toward danger’, as Romulus Linney once declared, in a lecture that I happened to witness while an epic summer thunderstorm raged outside the lecture hall’s windows.

Because lately I have written mainly dramas, and documentary and memoir plays, I may sound as if I’m shilling for more of the same. But the best comedy is dangerous (I have this on authority from my professionally funny wife) as it satirizes the powerful and assails shibboleths. There’s a healing honesty in comedy too, in telling the truth about our vulnerabilities and fears and shames.

The playwright Joe Orton was rehearsing the premiere of his seminal farce *Loot*, in which the titular stolen goods have been stuffed inside a casket that is supposed to contain a character’s dead mother; the corpse is stashed instead in a cupboard. Hijinks ensue, her body’s tossed around onstage, undressed, done up as a dressmaker’s dummy; at some point her glass eye pops loose and rolls around—in and out of hands and, if I recall, a mouth. But the play wasn’t working in rehearsal; it just wasn’t very funny. So one day Orton brought in his dead mother’s dentures and asked a particularly problematic cast member to hold out his hand. He placed the well-worn prosthetic teeth in the actor’s sweaty palm. ‘These are my dead mother’s teeth,’ the playwright informed the actor, who reacted with a queasy mixture of revulsion and shame and anger. ‘That’s what’s missing from your performance,’ Orton said. And by all accounts the play got funnier.

I have wanted to wake up for a long time. Many of my plays began with the imperative, figuratively and in one instance literally, ‘Wake up!’ It’s a cinematic commonplace: all those bedside alarms, our protagonists waking to the stories that will change their lives forever.

But my urge to see and say things as they are was counterbalanced by my fear of life, by the muddle of my anxiety and ego. My repression. I simultaneously hid and revealed myself in my plays. I gravitated toward historical epics, where time in its grandest sense could be stage-managed, and where the casts were large and the ideas larger. My props—I'm serious—propagated out of control. I camouflaged myself in clutter.

I was drawn to ghost stories: for the ready metaphor of child abuse, or so I discovered with time (and therapy), but also because my true self was present like a ghost in my plays.

I used to think that all good plays were haunted, or they were hauntings at least in performative terms. When I was new to New York City I wanted to start a theatre company called the Dead Theatre. Partly this was a joke, as in, Okay, fine, the theatre's dead; it's almost always been dead, yet we're a theatre and here we are. But also: Let's do what the dead do well, then. Haunt. Let's step out of the wings of the past, out of the personal and the cultural unconscious, and remind ourselves and our audience of something unsettling and unsettled that needs to be confronted and, if possible, set right. So I liked forgotten stories. Or, better yet, unknowable stories that alluded to unspeakable truths.

But I was still, myself, half-hidden. Or I was creatively somnambulistic. Remember: I am you; the playwright is the audience. By trying to wake you up, I was trying to wake myself up.

We all wake up, again and again. It's a dramaturgical fantasy that our lives can change fundamentally in a climactic instant. Trauma reverberates backward and forward in time.

When as a boy I witnessed my brother throw himself out the window of our attic (or the immediate aftermath of his self-defenestration, really); when as a young man I left my agoraphobic family for Ireland with only an overstuffed pack on my back; when I was disowned by my family more than a decade ago, for reasons I suspect I'll never fully comprehend; when my wife Jessica texted me the results of her biopsy—I was in the middle of auditions for a play of mine in Manhattan and she was back home in LA—'it is cancer' (her cancer); when six months later I awoke from twilight sedation to the news of a tumor the size of a softball . . .

In all these cases the thought occurred to me, concurrent with my panic and dread, that I was receiving a gift, if only I could survive it.

And each time I woke up, I wrote better. Some of it was probably too raw to be pleasing, but, with a little time and distance, I found I could write with more power. This isn't just boasting—I can't claim that anybody else felt the same way about my writing, if they were paying attention at all. My new power, my authority, was something I sensed in the moments of writing, what Barry Hannah called 'the party at the typewriter', which is all we have anyway as writers, the rest being not our business—because it is business. Lately I have wanted to write plays simply between you and me. Happening now, in this room; sometimes in a fictional

setting, sometimes with my two actors playing a plethora of characters. But always essentially two people in one place: two-in-one and a one-place that is changeable, vertiginous, with an audience of whomever might show up. No set, or not much of one. No props, if you can imagine. No miming—please. Lights and sound still belong—as storytelling tools, but also because these elements are allusive. We are theatrically inside my head, after all—why pretend otherwise?—a head in the midst of waking up.

It's trauma, unfortunately, that usually wakes us. Catastrophes, private and public—divorces, earthquakes, elections—force change, or create the desire to change.

As in war, I suspect, so it is in the sickroom: senses heighten. Reliefs sharpen. Every leaf on a tree, it has been said. In my case it was often smell. Like a superpower, or a symptom of pregnancy, I was almost canine for a while. It was hard to bear, and it's only slightly abated. My new plays are noticeably smelly.

In the midst of trauma everything seems to mean something. Signs and symbols crop up. You've noticed them before, you're a writer, but now you knit them together with an alacrity that sometimes makes you question your sanity. You take comfort in the intensely personal symbolic meaning of passing pest-control and plumbing trucks. The numbers thirteen and fourteen. Spiders as metaphor for chemo (let them crawl through the house of your body and do their dark work). Yes, as Viktor Frankl noted while surviving Auschwitz: even birds.

So you pray. For angels. You meet some. That male nurse

who caught you as you fell the first morning when you tried to walk after surgery. The nurse who embraced you as you sobbed and told you that her daughter was born in 1973, just like you, and she has a rare cancer and 'she's still here'.

These are dramatic moments that meant something, must mean something.

Naturally the past seeps in. So be it. Your life flashes before your eyes, but maybe in slow motion, over weeks and months—a year. You may succumb to writing memoir, before the tide recedes, before you've recovered or run out of time.

This summer is also that summer. Yesterday is today. I sat on that bench in Cork City scribbling poems in my notebook, just as I sit on this bench in Kenmare in County Kerry scribbling these words. Or—I am revising these paragraphs now on a grassy verge in New Hampshire in the village where, almost to the day, I was married eleven years before.

I remember my first writers' conference easily: one-on-one, a decorated novelist who'd read my short story suggested I should try writing plays instead. (Why did I believe him?—*Did I believe him?*) My best friend's mother, whom I loved more than my own, was dying back home in a hospital bed in her living room of a recurrence of breast cancer. The week before, she had beckoned me to bend and kiss her, and when I did she asked if I would become a poet and I answered emphatically 'Yes,' I already was: I was going to a writers' conference, after all.

But even trauma has an end, somehow. Sometime. You will know you're feeling better when you feel you want to write.

You are rebounding, on your own two feet, when you find yourself envying other writers again, just a bit. You may feel let down. You worry again that your writing is no good. You crave accolades and applause, again. You desire. And you desire because you are healing. You are healthy, happy—you are astonished! Yet now you want to know, need to know, what has it all been for?

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‘You have peered behind the curtain,’ they say (they seem to like to say). It’s a platitude but I enjoy it for its theatrical implications. The sick have seen the ropes and pulleys, the backs of the scenery flats, the stagehands bustling amid sawdust and loose screws and rodent droppings. We have glimpsed something of how it all works, this performance of living.

My erstwhile subject and collaborator Roberto Flores, a Chicano activist and anarchist, said it to me: *Behind the curtain*. He almost died a decade ago from hepatitis C followed by liver cancer, but at the last moment a family friend’s death and organ donation rescued him. The donor had been a strapping teen, and Beto is small; his new liver juts from his side, under his arm like a football.

Paul Watson the war reporter, when he learned of my cancer diagnosis, emailed me: ‘Writer write thyself. No doubt you will see things only you can tell, with your words.’ The idea is common: almost dying should make us wiser. Kinder. ‘A deep distress hath humanised my Soul’—Wordsworth, remember? Or that’s the idea, at least.

We have all peered behind the curtain, in the moments and weeks and years of our cataclysms; we should tell the world what we have seen. What, perhaps, we are beginning to learn.

I have changed. Though like all change I know it’s temporary.

My bladder’s smaller. My liver’s grown back. Parts of us regenerate, other parts don’t.

My hands and feet are numb from neuropathy from the chemo. But they’ve been waking up. I’ve been told it could take a year or more. Some feeling never returns.

I’ve learned to be less careful. I was a dedicated hand-washer for years and look where that got me.

As a writer I was a perfectionist—an aesthetic hand-washer, if you will—but I am less so, much less so now. Perfection is seductive, but messes have more life.

Overall I’m less afraid.

Of opening nights, for example. Still, I don’t really want to see that particular performance or, worse yet, chat with you at the after-party. It’s no insult to you or to my colleagues, but my work, as they say, is done here.

I’m less scared to give readings or lectures; I don’t need a drink, before or after.

I’m less nervous to meet you. The awkward thing said and unsaid, yours and mine—I just let it fly, let it lie. Doesn’t bother me much.

I’m less scared of rejection. I mean, who cares? I want to eat, sure; I need a job, some respect. But I almost died; I could be about to die again. What does it matter if

somebody I don't know doesn't care, for whatever reason, for what I've written?

I lied: rejection still hurts. But less so, much less so now . . .

I'm grateful more often. Bewildered all the time. It's too early to feel guilty. I distinguish less between what I live and what I write.

I cry more. I often look forward to crying, though I don't let my young daughter see.

She is three years old and right now squealing with delight 'Sandpipers! Sandpipers!' along the beach in Caherdaniel, on a misty late-June morning, with her mother following a few steps behind, when two years ago I thought her mother would die. [When] I know she will, one day, as I will. But maybe now we will have longer together than we thought. With my lower back seized from driving the perilously twisting lanes of Kerry, I lie on a bed of rock above the cove, just as I lay in countless gurneys over the last eighteen months, wheeled into operating rooms and the spinning, droning orifices of CT and MRI scans; I now allow others to care for me, sometimes.

I have learned that I feel annoyed to be called brave. As an artist and as a survivor.

My wife feels much the same, having been public lately about her cancer and treatment, and basing a season of her own TV show on the experience. Maybe we're modest or in denial. Maybe we're annoyed because we've had no choice—the choice was whether or not to give in and give up. But we were given hope by our doctors, and before that we'd been given our daughter.

Maybe we just don't want you to feel sorry for us—your commiserating, well-meaning frown-smiles. We don't want the presumed distance between us reinforced.

When some people say we have been brave, what they really mean is that we have been brave to talk about it. Cancer. Or in my previous plays writing about war and about the mental illness and abuse in my family: 'How brave,' they said. Sometimes adding, 'I couldn't do what you do.' Meaning: *I couldn't—wouldn't—reveal what you choose to reveal.*

Far be it from me to judge anybody's suffering and what they choose to do with it. I often wish I'd kept my mouth shut, as a writer, about any number of things. A therapist once told me that I have trouble distinguishing secrecy from privacy, and she was right. She is right.

But weakness is a taboo, and one I believe every playwright should violate—for ourselves, for our characters, and for the audience. This is unnatural. We fear that in our weakened state we will be exploited, seized and preyed upon. When one is ill one feels a kind of primal embarrassment: surely one has done something to cause, if not deserve, this liability. In the many months of my treatment I was often frightened as I hobbled along the bucolic lanes of my Southern Californian neighborhood; it would have been easy to be mugged, to be murdered, I felt. I could have been blown over by an ill-timed puff of wind.

And yet I've always believed that it is my responsibility—my calling, I am apt to call it in my more priestly moods—to try to tell the truth about that which is most difficult to be truthful about. To tell others the truth, as skillfully as

possible. And you will, I hope, return the favor; we'll learn from each other and feel less alone. Because what else are we all doing here?

We are running out of time. 'Running', notice, not walking; plays (and all stories, really, and lives) sprint through their conclusions.

But wait—that's it? Time too often moves slowly when we're young, when we're bored and waiting. Time flies as we age, acts two three four of our lives . . . Time ceases to exist when you're having fun, and by 'fun' I mean, again, joy-sorrow-terror. Presence.

You have heard it said of Shakespeare that his tragedies are over when everybody's dead, his comedies when everybody's wed. Though a wedding is a kind of death, as it starts the story of a new life together; and there are survivors onstage at the end of *Romeo & Juliet* and *Hamlet*, etc., to make sense, and poetry, out of what we've witnessed together and survived.

Dramaturgs will say simply that one has reached the end when the problem of the play has been solved, when the protagonist's conflict has been settled. There's nothing left that *has* to happen. Our time out of time has run out, and we're returned to ourselves and our changing bodies—the ever-revising stories of who we think we are now.

Endings that feel like beginnings are profound. And if not profound then accurate. As Sam Shepard said: 'The most authentic endings are the ones which are already revolving towards another beginning.' I like that: 'revolving'. We know that the story continues elsewhere, perhaps

with other characters, without us watching; but the play of life that is always happening never truly ends.

So take heart. Another play will make you laugh like this one, cry like that; many will bore, disgust, and, if you are lucky, enrage you. The best, that is the most lifelike play, will do all these things and more over the rollicking course of its very limited engagement.

What's that ancient adage about never dipping your toe in the same river twice? The river's always changing. But so are we.

It's a luxury to stand beside the river. As if we are not in it. The young, the healthy, revel in this delusion. They watch the afflicted characters in their stories rush by. The playwright luxuriates this way too—recuperating, really—sitting upon the shore scribbling, as does the audience in the moments in which they are compelled, within the spell of the play.

We are all in that river, in actuality. Essentially we are the water.

Maybe this is not so much an examination of the playwright's craft as a description of where I have been living lately: between the graveyard and the river. As I have literally lived for a week while drafting many of these pages on the banks of on an estuary on the southwestern coast of Ireland. The River Sheen on one side, like Time's river, and a famine graveyard just up the hill from me. Through one living room window I can see mossy Celtic crosses, one crowned with an almost full bottle of whiskey. A few years back I would have found my location disconcerting.

Now it is the skull upon my desk. Because I know now that this is life: out the window on the other side of the living room my daughter runs in the grass above the glimmering Sheen.

Unspeakable: Speech Onstage

2018

A lifetime ago I stood in a mansion beside an old poet who sat in a chair like a throne. You know the place. We were waiting for the dinner gong; writers were drinking wine. He was a formidable and forbidding figure in most ways. We'd dined near each other along the interminable communal table many times that month, but I hadn't yet found the courage. Maybe it was the wine but I said, 'You teach at this school. I went to this same school. Do you happen to know this writer I know?' He fixed me in his sidelong squint: 'Quit bugging me, man.'

I was speechless. The Supreme Playwright might well have written 'awkward pause' or even a Pinteresque 'silence' in the script of our minuscule drama. The unspeakable yawned between us as I exited the mansion without dinner, pursued by my shame.

What makes a play play?

Other ways of writing tell stories of struggle and change like prose; are stirring and linguistically pleasurable like poetry. Ask any actor—ask Hamlet and he'll tell you: what makes a play playable is speaking the speech.