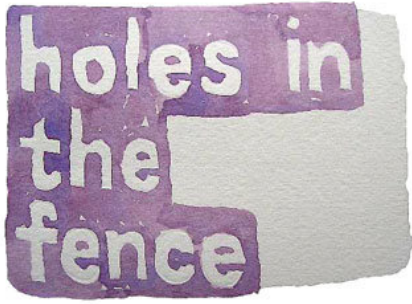


Story for performance #87
webcast from Paris at 08:03PM, 15 Sep 05



Source: Editorial, 'Bad start in Gaza', *Washington Post online*, 15/09/05.

Tags: [literature](#), [countryside](#), [dreams](#)
Writer/s: [John O'Brien](#)

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It was called Night Novel and he had been writing it for years. At first it was a few drunken, inspired scrawls after whatever bender his early twenties had fomented in him. A girl left him or someone had a party or his cousin died; he drank; he railed; then something crawled out of his unconscious and took root near the surface of his brain; and then at last he wrote. Half a page, five lines, didn't matter, it was never all that long. But it was always nice and grungy.

The novel got longer, he got tougher, another decade passed, patterns started to emerge. All the women had hearts of gold, yeah like that was realistic. All the guys had killed someone or were about to die through cowardice. Pets got run over. Every punch line had a topper. Geniuses with a bent to solve the world's problems got caught up in arguments about whether they were in fact geni.

And a few things stayed with him. There was a Jewish character for a long time who he fell for, a kind of rough-trade Lauren Bacall. There was a mellowed-up tough guy who lived alone in the hills and propagated native plants on 400 hectares of virgin rainforest, under the canopy of stinging trees. Two brothers feuded for a while. A man broke some eggs and that had consequences. And his writing grew illegible.

So he switched to a computer. But it was a pain turning it on, especially turning it on when he was drunk, which was less and less often. Until the accident.

Accident or unconscious manifestation of being sick of things, sick of it all? Or was it actually the Night Novel itself that had been neglected, so one day when he was chain-sawing a small tree near his house, the saw kicked back and he copped it in the neck, crawled (there's that word again) a kilometre to the neighbour's house—he found a hole in the five-barb fence, which one day he intended to fix but meanwhile it saved his life—through a five-barb fence over nettles—and suffered mild brain damage. Which, according to Night Novelists, is the worst kind.

Now the only real things seemed to be the drink and the novel. The pair formed an act of Forgetting and an act of Return at the same time. Nowadays the computer was always on. Hell, he'd been writing this thing so long, why not distribute it, blog it, make it global, like everyone else on the planet seemed to be doing these days?

Days would pass where he would smash away at the keyboard, feeling its territoriality under his fingertips. Nights would pass and he'd read the results the next day, in his haze, and not recognise a word. Occasionally he'd get comments: 'cool dude, me and my friends love your blog' and he'd write back fiercely, and keep writing back until they left him alone.

But he was alone anyway. Just him, his disability cheque, his (paid-for) house on a timbered hill, his fewer and fewer friends, his occasional sallies into his thin forest to prove that he was unafraid of his chainsaw.

Oh, and his stoushes with the neighbour, the one who kept the goats, which burrowed through the fence and made new gaps. He hated gaps but she, the neighbour, seemed to expect him to fix them. He got the shock of his life one day when she proposed. My God, was that real, or was it the Night Novel? He tried to picture her face the next day. He'd seen it so often but he had been busy with his lifelong quest of fucking himself up. He tried to remember what he'd said, what words she'd used in the proposal, and whether he'd given her an answer. He could hear a distant shouting—yes that was her calling her goats in for the milking.

Maybe she was as much frayed around the edges as he was. Maybe she didn't know.

So he checked out last night's edition of the Night Novel. And this is what it said:

'Woke up again and she was there, my own debauched Bacall, haven't seen her for a while. Waited on the street corner, talking to her. She seemed angry, she's always had so much influence over me. Her smile twisted in a grimace or was it a rictus? She was there to say goodbye. I said how about one for the road, and maybe one for the white line? She said, one what? Okay, be that way, I said. So she went and we waved and I guess I'll miss her, I don't know.

'Then this other one was there. I was trying to wipe the blood off my hands, and trying to remember if it was my blood or someone else's. And she came in, this other one, this angel, and I guess she was more like a dream. But I don't think this one will fly by night. I think she's a keeper. I might find her a pumpkin shell, man, and keep her very well. She got down on her knee and begged. Did she want to be noticed, was she some mousy librarian? Was I good enough for her or her for me?

'Wedding's set for a month today. I might have to ring the old man, find out if he's up to travelling. When I went to bed, alone for once, I found myself staring up at my ceiling. At that red spray there. At that busted light. There was a scream in the street, but I didn't let it disturb me. Tonight I knew I'd have good dreams.'

He liked what he'd written. Trouble was, it didn't help him work out whether he was engaged or not. That's the thing about Night Novel—when the unconscious gets to work on the day's events, it really shoves its powerful thumbs deep into the clay.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by John O'Brien.