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THE BEST AMERICAN

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INTRODUCTION BY

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where to start with him. How general should her criticisms be? Should they be specific only to this night, or should this be the door through which they pass to talk about all of his failings? Oh, the possibilities! She will have license to go anywhere, to say anything! She pours more gin into her tumbler of merlot, and when she looks up, at 2:47, his headlights are drawing chalk across the front window. This will be good, she thinks. This will be so good. It will be florid, glorious; she will scratch and scratch. She runs to the door, for she simply can't wait for it to begin.

Are you finished? — Mark Hadley, *Guam*

Am I finished with what? With all of those short-short story things.
— Mark Hadley, *Guam*

I can be. Are you suggesting that I finish? I think so. I kind of think it would be nice if we just stopped all this and got into the good part of the book. No offense. — Mark Hadley, *Guam*

One thing before we go: I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate and thank and lushly praise the student committee. Most of the group has been together for about two years now, and I have to say that I've never seen a more inspiring group of young people. They almost make you sick with their intelligence, charm, cohesiveness, divisiveness, astuteness, brilliance, and dedication. It was with great pride that I heard about their college plans, all of them impressive to no end, and it is with a heavy heart that we say goodbye to them. As of June, we are now but three members, our committee, and are in the process of putting together our new group. By the time you read this, we will have assembled a new panel, ideally one without misguided obsessions with zombies and, we hope, inclusive of at least one member who will fit into the cage we used to keep for Francesca. On their behalf, I hope you enjoy this collection, and that you fulfill your ham radio needs elsewhere, if you have them. These sorts of needs.

DAVE EGGERS

INTRODUCTION

I SHARE WITH many people, especially men, the tendency to stubbornly resist being given directions or having to read any and all user guides or assembly manuals. I like to believe that at least some of my assiduous avoidance of preparatory instruction comes from a sincere and positive desire to get the word first — to get to it, to see and sound it out for myself in relative ignorance, to dive in with a minimum of preconception. Judgments will be formed almost instantly anyway, as rapidly and effortlessly as conjunctivitis jumped from my right eye to my left the day before yesterday. Usually, when I pick up a book, I turn to a first page and already, without consciously reading a single syllable, there are paper, ink, font, letter-size, and any number of other factors about which I'll inevitably leap to conclusions. I don't need or want to be taken by the hand, don't want to be prepared for the written contents of any book, because this somehow makes the words that follow any introduction someone else's — claimed before I've had a chance to weigh and dissect their combinations myself. If I've liked reading a book, however, I'll sometimes subsequently read its introduction out of curiosity.

Therefore, I don't consciously refer to anything in this book, directly or indirectly, do not seek in the slightest way to prepare you for the selections made by others for *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2004*. I do not even recommend that you read

That's why *Nonrequired* is what stands out for me, what gets my attention in the title of this book. Not being required to understand or explain words appeals to me. It feels better not to be in a hurry to take ownership of or pervert the essence of words with a critical eye, but instead to trust inspiration in reading or writing to come as notions, impulses, or lives that already had shape and were waiting to be perceived long before I stumbled over them. Better to recognize than to decide what words mean to me personally. Write something down and it is dead; writers are murderers. Some writers do kill more gracefully, inflicting less pain than others. Nevertheless, any word written is dead. It can be revived only by being rewritten or reread, by being given successively different meanings.

People whose occupation it is to judge writing and recommend how it should or should not be read often seem to require a tidiness of language, a measurable consistency in the arrangement of words. There might be an understandable assumption involved in school instruction — an expectation of self-regulation of content and style on the part of the student — that takes for granted that certain rules and restrictions have always provided starting points or blueprints for writers and readers alike. A lot is to be said for learning rules and skills, born of practical experience and study, before dismissing them. Nonetheless, it seems worth remembering that words do exist — with or without academic pruning and judgment — as sounds or emotional reference points and will always invite spontaneous, subjective reactions.

Did you ever read or write a sentence without a thought for the origin or reason of any of the words from first to last, simply because you felt like doing so? Don't you snatch words impulsively or intuitively from road signs, songs, newspapers, magazines, television shows, Web sites, overheard sotto-voice disagreements, from your own, decaying, hodgepodge record of all that happens? Individual words and phrases can stand alone and satisfy a reader in even the longest story, regardless of context. When we read willingly, we can get lost in the beauty and rhythm of words before we look for any satisfaction in the significance of their ordering.

any of this book, especially not a single additional word of mine beyond this one. Put the book down, if you like. Give it away, dump it, cut it into little pieces and eat it, burn it — apply any anarchic means or action you can invent to dispose of it, to put it out of your thoughts. Or, read on. Read some, read randomly, backwards, over a period of years, retain none of it, mock it, misapply it, write to the publisher about its defects in content and professional presentation — particularly this nonrequired introduction, if you wish — or about how your life was for the slightest instant disrupted or detoured for the better by reading this book. As far as I know, none of those sample reactions is illegal at this point. We are still free to read or not read (unless this book of nonrequired reading is required by someone you wish to obey), and still free to make up our own minds about what we have or have not read.

I value words. I am curious about the way words sound, how they draw pictures and provoke unexpected emotional reactions. A single disconnected word or phrase can stop you cold, give you a new world to live in. I like reading unauthorized excerpts of the minutes of private meetings. I like reading photo album captions, want ads, my son's homework, Chinese AIDS-prevention pamphlets, laundry lists, foreign phone books, obituaries, awkward subtitles, road maps, lost-pet fliers fading on streetlight poles, old and forgettable books, instruction manuals I do not need but have found torn out of publications or removed from the packaging of the obsolete product concerned — useless information that I imagine having discovered or saved from extinction within its proper but outdated original context. I enjoy reading how people wrote in another time about what I do not understand.

As a boy I would read under a blanket using a flashlight long after my parents, grandmother, or teachers thought I was asleep. Now I find the same secret enjoyment in reading whatever interests me, and still do so long after the lights should be out. There is no need to hide with a flashlight anymore, and the only one tricked is me — out of precious rest. To this day, I resist reading what others recommend and am attracted to reading what is unpromoted, unnoticed, discarded, perhaps unnecessary.

Maybe we can understand or feel the "rightness," the tone of words, before we embrace or reject the story they might tell, before we concern ourselves with the logic of their sequence. Our expectation of coherence and, eventually, of resolution in any piece of writing does, of course, grow as we become familiar with the quality of its wordplay, when we begin to guess what line of thought or even which phrase might or ought to come next. Perhaps one of the toughest challenges a writer faces, aside from getting started, is how to remain personally interested in words to come, involved in where the story might go. If there are no surprises along the way for the writer, no happy chance of discovery regardless of how well planned or structured the work sets out to be, it is unlikely to be of memorable interest for the reader.

I recently had the unfortunate experience of losing practically everything I'd written during the last three years. As I was in the process of moving from one house to another, my car was loaded with boxes of books, clothes, kitchen utensils, and all the usual household appliances and sacks of hurriedly packed scraps of letters, papers, drawing, photos, soaps, music, hood ornaments, lucky sticks and stones, spurs, superfluous combs, and outdated to-do lists. While I was carrying some of this debris into the new house, someone broke into the passenger-side window of my car and grabbed the backpack containing several notebooks I'd filled, since early 2001, with handwritten stories and poems.

The backpack also contained a couple of journals, two screenplays, my passport, and two half-read books. The hardest losses were the stories and poems in the notebooks. I had been looking forward, in particular, to reviewing and fine-tuning hundreds of pages of, for me, uncharacteristically long and unguarded poetry that had been written during a series of very quiet nights spent in the Sahara Desert in late 2002. During that time, for various reasons, I had begun writing extended pieces using a lot of abstract imagery and fragmented recollections from my childhood, combined with the rush of sensory impressions I was receiving while living and working in Morocco. The thick white pages of the notebooks from that time were grimy, stained red from the dust near Ourzazate, yellow from Erfoud and Merzouga, brown and gray

from my hands and the ashes of campfires and cigarettes, dog-eared, black with grease. They held sandstorms, camel gargles, vultures, Arabic songs, calls to prayer, prayer rugs, tea, coffee, tent flaps. They reeked of diesel, were alive with flies, fossils, heat waves, goats, soldiers, scorpions, unseen women, donkeys, date palms, doves, hawks, vipers, new or decaying gardens, graveyards, city walls, mosques, stables, wells, fortresses, and schools. This was the start of a long-overdue cataloging of buried memories of plants and their names, horses, car accidents, lightning, pet lizards, parts of arguments between my parents, illnesses, sheep; of fish caught, lost, released, cleaned, cooked, spied in rivers, ponds, lakes, eaten, rotting, struggling, dying, or dead. In those notebooks could be found faces of teachers I've had, of policemen, children, and old people suffering, giggling, sleeping, or otherwise lingering in emergency rooms, bus stations, on street corners, walking or standing on traces of roads or tracks through harsh deserts, prairies, icescapes, or urban wastelands. Here were all the toy soldiers, ineffective windshield wipers, first tastes of chocolate, wine, asparagus, venison, trout, chalk, ants, a Big Mac, dirt, dandelion stem, unsweetened mate, duck, beer, snow, blood . . .

As the world was girding itself for the obviously imminent invasion of Iraq by the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing," a growing sense of urgency could be felt even out there in the idyllic stillness of the North African dunes under ridiculously starry skies. That, as well as the effects of working all day in the sun on horseback with Moroccan, Spanish, French, English, and American colleagues, probably put me in an unusual state of mind each night as I sat eagerly scribbling in relative silence and welcome isolation. I'm not trying to go into travel diary mode, just trying to briefly describe a place and time that I was lucky to be in and that provided me with a lot of energy and inspiration. Words were everywhere I looked, filling dreams, providing names for everything. It was all I could do to keep up with them, catch a few as they drifted through me, fell now and then from clouds, from my eyes to the table, onto my lap or became tangled in horses' manes. Most of the words got away, as they usually will, but at night I regularly

managed to gather them in bunches. The many handwritten poems that came out of that experience were what I most was looking forward to tackling in my new home back in California. That is why the backpack containing those notebooks was on the top of the carload of belongings, leaning against the passenger-side window, in plain view for any potential passing thief. Out of my sight for perhaps five minutes, and then gone forever.

I spent a lot of time and effort in the following weeks scouring my part of town, looking through trash cans and alleyways, offering no-questions-asked rewards, doing anything I could think of to find what was irreplaceable for me and probably completely useless to whoever had stolen it. Finally, I let most of it go, knowing I would never be able to recreate what had been written far from home in that exhausted but uniquely productive state of mind. It does not matter where any of it was written, or whether any of it was as valuable as I remember it being. What had taken its place was the painful sense of losing ideas, forgetting unlikely swervings, unexpected matings and applications of words. Just as I've recently had the scary but hopefully temporary experience of not being able to see very clearly — because of the conjunctivitis — I now was faced with the alarming reality that newly captured and arranged impressions were gone. Patches of recorded feeling vanished, irretrievable. There is no point in trying to remember and rebuild the word houses, word hills, word dams, or word skeletons like some sort of archeology project. There may be pieces I recall or inadvertently retell, but every word is new, is going somewhere, will die no matter what I might do to tame or hold it.

You have, for whatever reason, continued to read up to this point in spite of the clearly presented options to do something else with your time many words ago. This nonrequired introduction has no doubt become so predictable, so obviously overstated in its meandering, that it might as well be required. Before I get any more entangled in this trap, I'll leave you with the following from the writer Paul la Cour:

"Being a poet is not writing a poem, but finding a new way to live."

VIGGO MORTENSEN

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

Half of a Yellow Sun

FROM *Zoetrope: All-Story*

(Editor's note: This story was originally workshopped at the Zoetrope Virtual Studio and originally published by the Virtual Studio member Beverly Jackson in her stellar online literary magazine *Literary Potpourri*.)

THE IGBO SAY that a mature eagle feather will always remain spotless.

It was the kind of day in the middle of the rainy season when the sun felt like an orange flame placed close to my skin, yet it was raining, and I remembered when I was a child, when I would run around on days like this and sing songs about the dueling sun and rain, urging the sun to win. The lukewarm raindrops mixed with my sweat and ran down my face as I walked back to my hostel after the rally in Nsukka. I was still holding the placard that read **MEMBER THE MASSACRES**, still marveling at my new — at our new — identity. It was late May, Ojukwu had just announced the secession, and we were no longer Nigerians. We were Biafrans.

When we gathered in Freedom Square for the rally, thousands of us students shouted Igbo songs and swayed, riverlike. Somebody said that in the market outside our campus, the women were dancing, giving away groundnuts and mangoes. Nnamdi and I stood next to each other and our shoulders touched as we waved green dogonyaro branches and cardboard placards. Nnamdi's placard read **SECESSION NOW**. Even though he was one of the student leaders, he chose to be with me in the crowd. The other lead-