

## Writers on Writing & the Creative Life /3

"What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw." —**William Maxwell**, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*

"People feel I wasted time [in exile, performing menial labor], but what is the tragedy of raising chickens? Every part of my life is important to who I am becoming every day, and this will determine what I write." —**Ding Ling**

"I know a lot more about life [at 50] than I did 20 years ago, 10 years ago. And I think that's important, to know how the water's gone over the dam before you start to describe it. It helps to have been over the dam yourself." —**E. Annie Proulx**

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way....You're very much of a piece. That's your strong point and your failing. You have a character that's all of a piece, and you want the whole of life to be a of a piece too—but that's not how it is....All the variety, all the charm, all the beauty of life is made up of light and shadow." —**Leo Tolstoi**, in *Anna Karenina*

"But please go on writing;...in the end it pushes its way like the plants. I wrote for 20 years in a void, and I learned patience." —**Anais Nin**

"At last, I like reading my own writing. It seems to fit me closer than it did before. I have done my task here better than I expected....Either I am a great writer or a

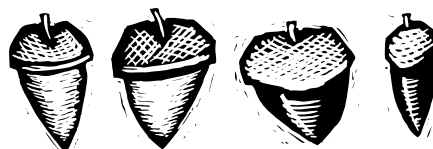
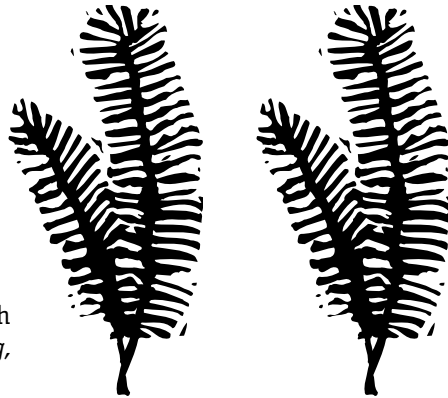
nincompoop....A cold douche should be taken (and generally is) before beginning a book. It invigorates; makes one say 'oh all right. I write to please myself' and so go ahead....The truth is that writing is the profound pleasure and being read the superficial." —**Virginia Woolf**, *A Writer's Diary*

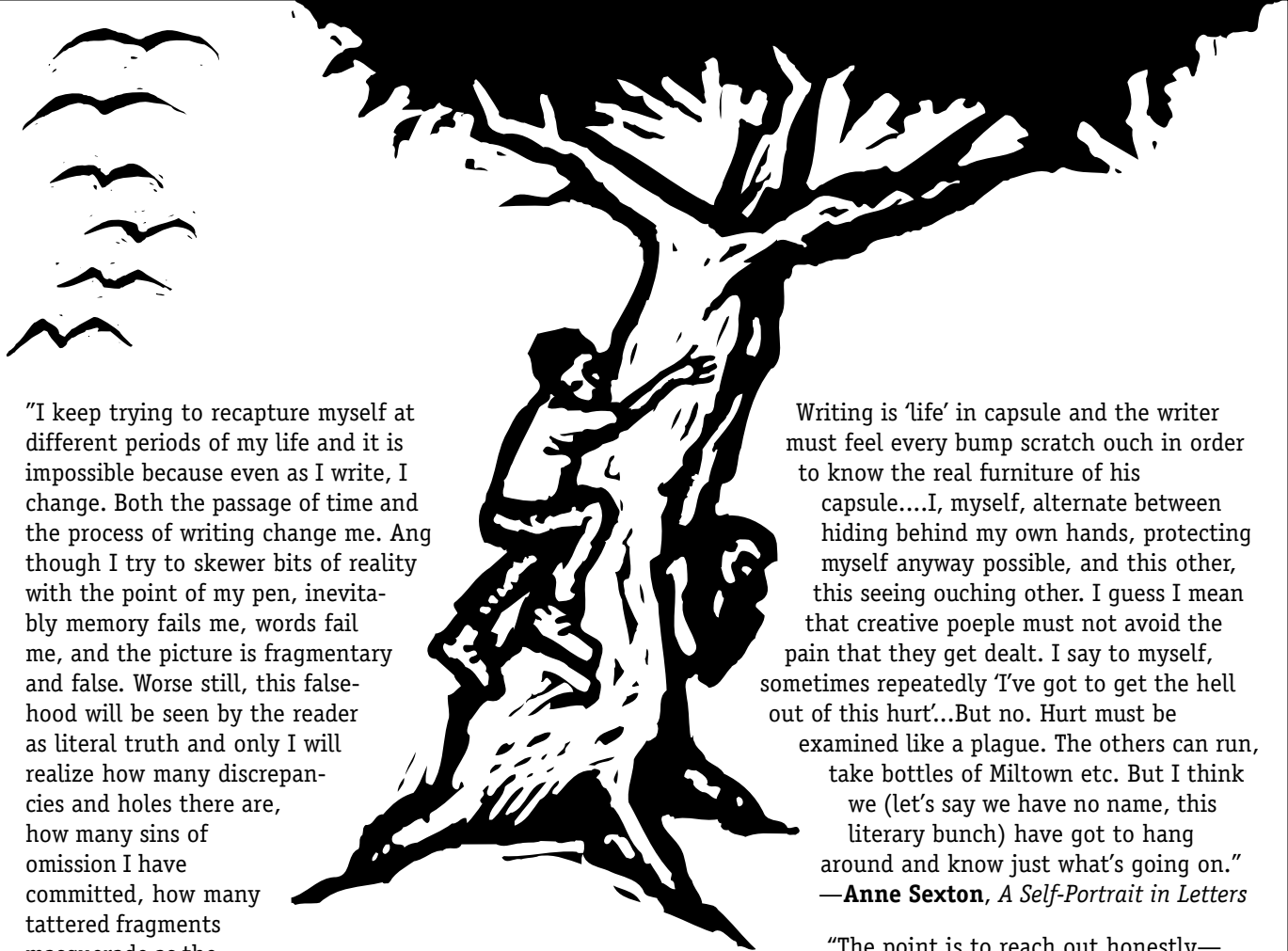
"I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them." —**John Keats**

"People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." —**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

"It is not only childish of a writer to want readers to see what he sees, to understand the shape and aim of a novel as he sees it—his wanting this means that he has not understood a most fundamental point. Which is that the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion *only* when its plan and shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't anything more to be got out of it." —**Doris Lessing**

"Life has no plot. It is far more interesting than anything you can say about it because language, by its very nature, orders things and life really has no order. Even those writers who respect the beautiful anarchy of life and try to get it all into their books, wind up making it seem much more ordered than it ever was and do not, finally, tell the truth. Because no writer can ever tell the truth about life, namely that it is much more interesting than any book. And no writer can tell the truth about people—which is they are much more interesting than any *characters*." —**Erica Jong**, *Fear of Flying*





"I keep trying to recapture myself at different periods of my life and it is impossible because even as I write, I change. Both the passage of time and the process of writing change me. And though I try to skewer bits of reality with the point of my pen, inevitably memory fails me, words fail me, and the picture is fragmentary and false. Worse still, this falsehood will be seen by the reader as literal truth and only I will realize how many discrepancies and holes there are, how many sins of omission I have committed, how many tattered fragments masquerade as the tapestry entire."

—Erica Jong, *How to Save Your Own Life*

"I think that writers must try *not* to avoid knowing what is happening. Everyone has somewhere the ability to mask the events of pain and sorrow, call it shock...when someone dies for instance you have this shock that carries you over it, makes it bearable. But the creative person must not use this mechanism anymore than they have to in order to keep breathing. Other people may. But not you, not us.

### ART by Herman Melville

In placid hours well-pleased we dream  
 Of many a brave unbodied scheme.  
 But form to lend, pulsed life create,  
 What unlike things must meet and mate:  
 A flame to melt—a wind to freeze;  
 Sad patience—joyous energies;  
 Humility—yet pride and scorn;  
 Instinct and study; love and hate;  
 Audacity—reverence. These must mate,  
 And fuse with Jacob's mystic heart,  
 To wrestle with the angel—Art.



Writing is 'life' in capsule and the writer must feel every bump scratch ouch in order to know the real furniture of his capsule....I, myself, alternate between hiding behind my own hands, protecting myself anyway possible, and this other, this seeing ouching other. I guess I mean that creative poeple must not avoid the pain that they get dealt. I say to myself, sometimes repeatedly 'I've got to get the hell out of this hurt'...But no. Hurt must be examined like a plague. The others can run, take bottles of Miltown etc. But I think we (let's say we have no name, this literary bunch) have got to hang around and know just what's going on."

—Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*

"The point is to reach out honestly—that's the whole point...I keep feeling that there isn't one poem being written by any one of us—or a book or anything like that. The whole life of us writers, the whole product I guess I mean, is the one long poem—a community of effort if you will. It's all the same poem. It doesn't belong to any one writer....You have the gift—and with it comes responsibility—you mustn't neglect or be mean to that gift—you must let it do its work. It has more rights than the ego that wants approval....But *my* point is—if you can feel you are in touch with experience, if you've (so to speak) stuck your finger into experience and have got it right and can put it down so that others (even other experience tellers) can comprehend their own lives better, can crawl in closer to the truth of it, then you must get on with it! And keep right on." —Anne Sexton (in a letter to Erica Jong)