STEPPING OUT

A prologue on diction, structure, magic, and democracy

A short walk in a southern wood

I sit down to write the book, and nothing happens.

It's summer out there. I'm working at an office desk in a ranger's hut close to a visitors' center by a glacial lake, and I'm a long way south of home. Being here's a gift, part of a prize I won for writing something else. And I want to spend my time here well; I want to spend it writing this book. If I don't, my publisher might kill me.

Though it's summer, it fell below freezing last night, and I was cold in my bed. But the morning is warm and still and clear. There are black peppermints standing up in it and black currawongs crying their guttural cry, and there's a light as clean and a sky as blue as any you're ever going know. I've come here to write a book; I walk out into the morning to find it.

And it's on the gravel track to Fergy's Paddock at the edge of the lake that my book comes to me. Between steps, it occurs to me (though not for the first time) that to write is to make sentences, and out of them to make a story or an argument, a business case or a poem. Whatever you want to write, it's sentences you'll need to master. Your task is to get to the end of each one and then the next until the end, but not just any old how. You have to get somewhere and take your reader with you; and you want to get there well—elegantly, economically, gracefully, reasonably. You don't want to trip, and you don't want your reader to stumble.

What the morning tells me is that a sentence is like a walk—like this one in particular. A good sentence is a gravel path through a forest. It's a track, not a road; it's a trail, not a footpath. You want it finished, but not anonymous. It needs personality, modulation, topography—a little

rise and fall. And it needs to take a sensible, and reasonably straight, path to wherever it's meant to be going.

But a sentence is not just a trail; it's also the walk the writer, and after the writer, the reader, takes upon it. For sentences live. They move, and they breathe. They travel, making themselves up as they go. A sentence—making it and taking it—is the walking, not just the walk.

And this is how you'd want your sentence to feel; this is how you'd like your reader to feel, reading it—the way I do, taking the track, this morning. You'd want them to trust it, the way I trust this path. It's sound. I can hear it under my feet, but it doesn't distract me. Because I can be sure it's not going to lose me, I give myself over to everything it opens out upon.

You'd want your reader to hear the cries of birds—sweet crescent honeyeater, harsh yellow wattlebird, distant yellowtail. You'd want your reader to smell the eucalypts and the leatherwoods; to catch a vivid crimson glimpse of waratah; to feel this waft of cold air; to sense, without seeing it yet, the deep glacial lake beyond the tea-trees; to guess at the whole long natural history that makes and goes on making the place she walks through. You wouldn't want her bitten by these bull-ants or centipedes or by that tiger snake. You probably don't want mud. Or mosquitoes. But there are always mosquitoes. And mud. And you'd want your reader to know that all of this was here, even the bugs and the snakes, going about their ancient business.

For you'd want all these qualities of your sentence and its world—what it says and what it implies—to catch your reader's attention without distracting her from the path or its destination, without tripping her up or putting her off.

A sentence is a morning walked through, some place on earth. It is an act, and a piece, of creation.

So, if you have something to write, concentrate on your sentences, and take them one at a time. Put down the burden of the whole huge book, the suite of poems, the letter, the report or the essay. Don't carry that monster on your back. When walking, as the Buddhists say, just walk. When writing, just write. Specifically, just write that sentence. And then write this one. Walk it elegantly, and let it suggest, let it even express, everything you mean to say, in the way it

tells its own short story—for every sentence is a short story. The way it takes the bends.

If you want to write, take a walk. Take it again, sitting down at your desk.

Try this

Take a walk. Come back home and write what you encountered. Try to write so that your sentences feel the way the walking felt.

Diction and structure

Actually, there was something else I did this morning before walking out into my sentence. There's a big whiteboard in the meeting room, and I did some thinking on it. I made a mindmap of the pieces of this book I still had to write—which was most of it. Then I flipped the board over and drew a gesture drawing of the book and all its parts.

Then I walked out, and my beginning began.

Writing is a dance—sometimes not all that pretty—between the big picture and the small. So much of the writing happens when you're not really writing at all. Sentences seem to come looking for you if you map their territory first.

So it was this morning. Plans are for starting out with and very often abandoning. You discover more interesting territory in your writing than you imagined in your map. You plan in order to compose yourself so you'll recognize a decent sentence when it arrives—so you'll know if it belongs and where and why.

This book is like my morning. It's about diction and structure; it's about what you have to do to hear just the right words at just the right time to speak them in just the right rhythm to say what you wanted to say. My book is about making beautiful sense.

What this book is and whom it's for

This is a book about what writing is—how you do it so it works and lasts.

Chapter 1 "Lore" is about first principles. It explains why and how good writing sounds like the very best kind of talking—clear, careful, animated, and memorable. Good writing means something fast. It speaks. Sometimes it even sings.

Chapter 2 "Sentencing" describes how sentences work and why verbs matter so much within them. It's a study of sentence craft, a guide to skilful sentence making. Nothing matters more in writing than making sound, astute, and elegant sentences, and varying their length and character. This chapter shows you how.

Chapter 3 "Grace" is about style. It's about writing—above all else—*clearly*. It's about saying more with less; about making the complex simple; about resisting fashion and cliché; about avoiding false eloquence and abstraction; about being particular; about writing (mostly) in the active voice; about using just the right word or phrase; and about a few other points of writing etiquette. "Grace" is about how to be cool, without outsmarting yourself, on the page.

Chapter 4 "Poetics" is for creative writers. It covers some skills and ideas that novelists, memoirists, essayists, and poets—literary artists—are going to need to master. While it doesn't aim to be complete, it speaks about most of what matters to me as a writer, and everything I've found useful. It talks about why literature matters so much. It covers poetics and politics; it speaks about listening and the importance of finding a form and sustaining a writing practice; it traverses beginnings and places and fragments and moments and stories and plots and characters; it considers the power of rhythm and the uses of tropes; it talks fairly straight about telling it sideways (indirection) and making your exposition sing and varying your pace and managing your points of view and rationing your modifiers and undoing, finally, everything you've done to leave behind the thing you really meant.

Chapter 5 "Attitude" is about writing for your reader and remembering your manners. If you want to write well don't think too much about your particular reader. Neglect your reader benignly. Please yourself, this chapter argues, but make yourself hard to please.

Chapter 6 "Shapely thoughts" is about structure. It's about thinking (wildly but well), planning (thoroughly but not too tightly), and

linking (sentences and paragraphs). It's about what would once have been called "rhetoric." And in it you'll learn (again, perhaps) the four kinds of paragraph you can build and the ten ways you might make your point. Know what you want to say before you say it, this chapter suggests, but let yourself discover what that really is in the act of composing orderly paragraphs.

I'm writing this book because I'm losing patience with pedestrian prose; with loose constructions; with techno-babble and psychobabble; with babble of all kinds; with the dreary, dumbed-down, polysyllabic diction of public and corporate life; with the desiccated abstractions and clichés and with the group-think of too many bureaucracies and professions and businesses. I'm not the first person to notice that we have entered deeply into an era of bad language—ill-conceived or carelessly, or even mischievously, expressed, or both. I fear we will live with the consequences of bad language for a long time if we don't do something about it now. Democracy—not just art—depends on the lucid expression of careful and independent thought. And that's another way of saying what this book is about. I'm writing this book because I'd like to encourage richer and smarter writing. Writing that's clearer and more pleasing and useful. I'm writing this book to do something about bad language and its consequences.

But mostly, I'm writing it out of love for the mystery, the hard labour and the beauty of good writing and the conversation it enables each of us to carry on—with each other and with the world we spend our lives trying to plumb. I write it in the knowledge that there are still a few of us left who know you can never know too much about how to write elegantly. I write it for the people who have been my students for twelve years now and for people like them, and I write it largely out of what they have taught me about what I thought I already knew about writing. I write it for the muses among us, as my friend Kim Stafford calls all the poets out there who have no idea they're poets—people who speak with the kind of personality and vividness and particularity a writer wants in his prose, even if he doesn't know he does.

Writing Well has been insisting upon itself for six or seven years now. About that time I heard its heartbeat within my teaching materials.

But six years ago, I had no books of my own in the world. It seemed precocious to write a writing book before writing a real one. Three, nearly four, books later, its time has come.

But this book began before all that. It began when I did. It is the upwelling of what I've learned over twenty years as a book editor, as a writer of essays and books and poems, as a teacher of creative and professional writing, as an instructor in composition and grammar, as a reader, and as scholar and critic. And from twenty-odd years before that, as a child becoming a man becoming a writer. It describes the ideas and techniques I've learned from far better writers than I am—disciplines I follow daily. There's nothing here I haven't seen help my students, in functional and in creative writing. And there's nothing here I didn't learn from other people.

These are one writer's thoughts about his craft. But this is more than a philosophy and a critique of writing. It's a book of both craft and technique. It's a writing primer; it's a manual of ideas; it's a box of tricks. I aim to be as practical as I can. I don't intend to say a single thing I haven't found useful myself. In fact, I've already started. For the most useful things I know are sound first principles.

This book is for everyone who wants to write.

It's for all of us who just want to get something said, so that something will get done—people for whom writing is a means to an end. But it's also a book for those for whom writing is an end in itself. This is a book of the disciplines (of diction and structure, of thought and sentence construction) that apply whatever one is writing. You may want to write, for instance,

- to get a job
- to win a tender
- to tell a woman that you love her and how and why—or to tell a man
- to make sure the children know the kind of life you lived and the kind of world you lived it in
- to change the world
- to change the government's mind
- to teach the children well

- to honour a place on earth
- to tell a story that wants you to tell it
- to find out what it is you have to say

or for some other reason. All of it is writing. And writing is a profession, or something like one. Like any other profession or any art (dancing, say, or football, politics, acting or accounting), you ought to know what you're doing. It goes better when you know enough craft to be yourself.

Writing that's any good sounds like someone talking well. Voice and personality matter more, you might think, to the writer-as-artist than they do to the writer-as-parent or as executive or policy wonk. But, in fact, voice matters whatever you write, because writing transcribes speech, and if your transcription lacks the qualities that make speech engaging your tale, however businesslike, will die in the telling.

This book will show you how to write tunefully. It may school you in many of the moves a writer needs to make, but it will have failed if it doesn't help you turn out writing that sounds like elegant speech. Like talk tidied up. That's the point of everything this book describes. For the trick to writing better is to make your writing less like you always thought writing had to be and more like yourself talking about something you know among people you trust. The tricks and techniques of wording and phrasing and sentencing and paragraphing are meant to help you, paradoxically, sound as natural on paper as you do, sometimes, when you talk.

Ten ways of saying the same thing well

William Strunk thought the best writing was vigorous (*The Elements of Style*). Here are ten tips for writing vigorous prose.

1 "The golden rule is to pick those words that convey to the reader the meaning of the writer and to use them and only them." (Ernest Gowers, *The Complete Plain Words*)

2 "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all of his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subject only in outline, but that every word tell." (W. Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition)

3 ". . . words are the only tools you've got. Learn to use them with originality and care. Value them for their strength and their precision. And remember: somebody out there is listening." (William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*)

4 "Short words are best, and the old words, when they are short, are the best of all." (Winston Churchill)

5 The best writing is
- clear
- trim
- alive

6 Grammar matters, but style matters more.

7 "Writing is the most exact form of thinking." (Carol Gelderman, *All the Presidents' Words*)

8 Writing is a process, and most of it happens when you are not writing.

9 Good writing is aware of itself—but not self-conscious. It does not happen accidentally. It results from the care the author takes with word choice, sentence structure and organization.

10 "Writing is only reading turned inside out." (John Updike)

CHAPTER 1

LORE

On voice, music, care, and thrift

To write well, express yourself
like the common people,
but think like a wise man. ARISTOTLE

Everyone knows how to write a bad sentence

Barry Lopez is a fine writer. If you wanted a model of humane and intelligent prose, of beautifully uttered sentences, and paragraphs as nicely arranged as the communities of lichen and moss on the sandstone rocks I passed this morning on my walk, you could do worse than study *Arctic Dreams* or one of his collections of fables—*River Notes*, say. A critic I know, reviewing *Arctic Dreams*, wrote once that Lopez doesn't seem to know how to write a bad sentence. It was a nice thing to say. Gracious and apt. But untrue. Barry Lopez knows perfectly well how to write a bad sentence. Everyone does. Even you.

What makes Lopez a good writer is that he knows the difference between those of his sentences that work and those that don't; between those he gets nearly right and those he nails; between those that sing and swing and those that mumble and fail. Sentences fail for many reasons. You may not know enough about what a sentence is, for instance, to reach the end with poise. Or you may, like Lopez, know more than enough, but you give them too much weight to carry; you work them too hard. And they break.

I know that Barry Lopez knows how to write (and right) a bad sentence because he rewrites everything—from essays and stories to his longest books—four and five times. And because he works on a typewriter, he writes every sentence from start to finish through four or

five drafts. Think about the discipline that calls for—the care and the labour it entails. It's through such effort that effortless sentences are born.

Writing is the art of making an utterance perfectly natural through the perfectly unnatural process of making every word and phrase again and again, cutting here and adding there, until it is just so. It is contrived spontaneity. What the writer wants is something just like speech only more compressed, more melodic, more economical, more balanced, more precise.

Good writers take almost too much care with their work. Which led Thomas Mann to say that "a writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people" (*Essays of Three Decades*). To be a writer you don't have to be the smartest soul on earth; you don't have to know the biggest words. You just have to commit yourself to saying what it is you have to say as clearly as you can manage; you have to listen to it and remake it till it sounds like you at your best; you just have to make yourself hard to please, word after word. Until you make it seem easy.

Writing, I'd say, is half gift and half hard work. And you can compensate for a want of the first by a surplus of the second. Let's not teach our students to be writers, pioneering writing teacher Wallace Stegner once said; let's just teach them how to write. It's not a lofty station; it's a job.

Work hard to make your writing seem to have cost you no effort at all. Struggle gamely to make it seem that your words came as naturally to you as the sun to the sky in the morning. Just as though you opened your mouth and spoke.

"The end of all method," said Zeno, "is to seem to have no method at all."

Here are some of Mr. Lopez's careful sentences:

> If I were to now visit another country, I would ask my local companion, before I saw any museum or library, any factory or fabled town, to walk me in the country of his or her youth, to tell me the names of things and how, traditionally, they have been fitted together in a community. I would ask for the stories, the voice of memory over the land. I would ask to taste the wild nuts and fruits, to see their fishing lures, their bouquets, their fences.