A few weeks ago I was invited to my alma mater to speak to a literature class about one of my books. I sat down in a classroom in the same building where I attended literature classes when I was a student, at the same kind of gigantic oak table with which the classrooms were outfitted when I was a student. I felt prepared to answer questions about my book. I wasn’t nervous or eager. I was grateful to be playing the role of distinguished visitor, as I am today, but I also felt vaguely fraudulent, as I do today, and desirous of acquitting myself well, which isn’t the best recipe for forthrightness. The questions began, and almost right away they grew alarming. Don’t mistake that as criticism of the students, who were doing exactly what students are supposed to do and better than it’s usually done. The students wanted to know, among other things, how I reconciled divergent modes of queerness, what I had meant by subjecting my female protagonist to numerous instances of rank sexism, and what the role of pan-Asianism was in my work. They all spoke the current language of literary analysis and I heard myself, under their influence, speaking it too. For me, there’s nothing better than encountering such questions generated by my work and nothing worse than being the person expected to answer them. The questions prove that the work has achieved that peculiar status of being a wholly made-up chunk of truth, a not-real reality, in other words, literature. But the expectation that I’m qualified to answer the questions is based on a lie: that I remotely knew what I was doing while writing the story. I grew aware that, in trying to
answer questions about a story I had written, I was telling another story—perhaps a wholly made up story. Like all stories it found logic where there was probably none and premeditation where there was probably none, made connections after the fact, was selective, and reached for the same sort of moral that might be found on a burned-wood plaque or a needlepoint pillow, for example, “The journey is the destination” or “From little acorns grow big oaks.” The truth is that as far as describing the process of novel writing, no one’s ever telling you the truth, however much they might think that they are. They’re always telling you another story, something smoothed out and plumped up with at least a few crumbs of useful advice, and I’m probably not even telling you the truth in saying that, although I’m trying.

When asked by students about where the characters and plot and story and style and themes and so on of my novels come from, I seem to find it shameful or inadequate to admit that all these things, obviously, arise from the vagaries of my mind as they are stimulated by the unhealthful activity of sitting someplace, at the moment of this writing in a naugahyde armchair, and stringing words together, usually with the aid of a laptop computer. The act of writing, as it’s more romantically known, is something like the stirring of a stagnant pond with a long stick. That’s a metaphor, not a great one, but it’s honest in that it really did occur to me unbidden, and I’m going to leave it in all its corny inadequacy and even subject it to some further examination in the hopes that it too will yield some useful junk if vigorously stirred. The stagnant pond is my mind and its contents: that murky soup of past experience, random information, physical crap owned, encountered, or even just thought about, and let’s not forget thoughts and other mental phenomena such as dreams and hallucinations. The long stirring stick is the writing. It churns things up from the murk of amnesia: the doll made of a tube sock your mother sewed for you when you were little, the fieldstone mountain cabin your friend took you to several summers ago, the first time you stepped on a jet plane, the reflectivity of a discarded gum wrapper on the half-bald grass field in Potawatomie Park, a photograph of your mother when she was younger than you are and thinner than you are. The thing I seem to find shameful or inadequate to admit to questioning students isn’t just that the world they discern in my novels has been grown from a whirl of sediment dredged from the murky, I-wouldn’t-recommend-swimming-there pond of my life. Far more, it’s that I don’t seem to have real control
over what gets stirred up. I didn’t mean to subject my female protagonist to an example of rank sexism as part of a plan to convey a message about gender equality. I was writing, and something got stirred up from someplace and it seemed right in some inarticulable way and I stuck it into my story, and later on, during the far more deliberate, far less intuitive process known as revision, I let it stay there because it still felt right, which to me means it felt true, not like the thing that should happen, but like the thing that had happened.

While I was trying to write this lecture, I read many, probably too many, of the previous Hopwood Lectures, and I became acutely aware that more often than not the implied form, whether or not the content matched up in a given case, was an accomplished writer providing advice or general wisdom about writing. This strikes me as an appropriate and impossible goal for the lecture, appropriate for the obvious reasons and impossible because I don’t believe there is any one truth about writing, that there’s any one piece of advice or nugget of wisdom that applies to all writing and all writers or even most writing and most writers. There’s only highly individualized testimony, this person explaining that he does it on a yellow legal pad from a detailed outline for five hours every weekday morning and that person telling you that she does it while walking around the trails of Mount Monadnock and talking into her iPhone’s voice recorder, this person telling you that writing is an act of radical empathy with persons other than oneself and that person telling you that writing is only ever about oneself even when it seems like it’s about other people. And it makes sense that all pontification about the nature of writing is highly individualized testimony, because writing itself is highly individualized testimony—which is as close as I think I can come to pontificating, at all honestly, about the nature of writing. After having read my fill of Hopwood Lectures and become thoroughly hysterical about how little of wisdom or advice I personally had to offer, some short time later I noticed that my favorite lecture was Mary Gordon’s, in which she talks about disliking Flannery O’Connor so much as to feel a preening self-regard that she herself is more sexually attractive than was Flannery O’Connor, who you’ll remember was an invalid much of her life who died tragically young. Mary Gordon is well aware of how unattractive it is of her to pride herself on being more attractive than Flannery O’Connor, and she talks about that, too. At the time I read the lecture I couldn’t fathom...
why Mary Gordon had thought to make these confessions her Hopwood Lecture, but as I’ve said, as time went on I realized it was my favorite of all the lectures I’d read. It was printed on my mind. And the reason is because it was vivid testimony, utterly unique, unimaginable as an utterance that any other writer would make. My second favorite Hopwood Lecture was actually just a part of a Hopwood Lecture: the first several minutes of Joan Didion’s Hopwood Lecture of 1979, in which she riffs on what thoughts occur to her in connection with the words “Hopwood” and “Detroit.” She thinks about some scarves her father gave her as a present, and a nervous guy she dated who tried to explain Dylan Thomas to her, and a number of other things that have nothing to do with writing advice or wisdom but everything to do with it, because these things have to do with Joan Didion, and her particular testimony, which we read and laud not for its modes of queerness or its messages of gender equality but for its being the particular testimony of Joan Didion. Later in the lecture Didion quotes Henry James and others on the nature of literature and experience but it’s in the early and very personal riffing that she most succinctly expressed, to me at least, one of my truths about writing: that the associative movements of the mind, which are constant and strange, are the real engine of writing, over which we have little control, regardless of what we say after the fact. These associative movements are so intimately ours, at least so intimately mine, that to say they’re the engine of the writing is also somehow shameful or inadequate, because they’re so personal and so unremarkable. That sock doll of mine; I must be thinking of it because there’s a pair of extra socks lying here on my disorderly desk, for when my feet get cold. My desk is dense-grained oak; it makes me think of the oak desk my father scored from his first landlady, here in Ann Arbor, in the early 1960s, when my father was a graduate student. That desk was the single grandest item in my childhood home, it signaled scholarship and aristocracy to me, it was only in very recent years that I realized, from its symmetrical design, that it must have in fact been a library table and that it might have been decommissioned, or stolen, from this very university. These associations of mine have just been narrated for you extremely artificially, as Joan Didion artificially narrates her own in her lecture, when we all know that the associative impulse, which is a part but not all of our memory, is a far more disorderly and simultaneous and
illogical and unstructured thing. Writing prompts it, and it prompts writing, in some unexplainable way, and the writer just pretends to be in charge. Thinking about writing and then thinking about the thinking about it, and noticing the way in which the thinking about writing always dishonestly turns writing into something more orderly, more narrated, than the process ever is, has made me think about dreams. The ingenuity of dreams, the way they ferret out and make use of material we didn’t even know we possessed, the way they form connections between the heretofore unconnectable, is reminiscent for me of what I love most and have least control of in my writing. My ideas are far more dreamed than diagrammed; they coalesce, seemingly of their own accord, sometimes taking years to give me enough to get started. When I first began writing this lecture, I wrote an entirely different lecture. That lecture had a tidy conceit, and it reflected my anxiety that I should impart some nugget of wisdom. In that lecture, I began by quoting the poet J. D. McClatchy, from a lecture of his which I attended, in which he had meant to give, and from which I had meant to receive, some nugget of wisdom. McClatchy had said in his lecture that “writing puts us in competition with the great dead.” That idea of competing with the dead had frightened and galvanized me, and I wrote many pages about it, but as I did, I more and more felt that I was performing. I was quoting an eminent man who had made his remark in connection with the eminent men who’d inspired him to write, in his case the classical poets, none of whom I’ve ever read. I was talking about the nature of competition, and the regrettable as well as the salutary effects of the competitive spirit, which, if I was honest with myself, were sentiments heavily influenced by Charles Baxter’s Hopwood lecture of 2006. Influence is unavoidable and often beneficial in writing but not in the absence of something that’s actually yours. All that posturing was only to get me to the point at which Joan Didion had simply started, without preamble or apology. What I’d really wanted to talk about, for which my “competition with the dead” conceit was an elaborate faked-up rhetorical justification, was the associative power Ann Arbor holds over me, the waking dream of this place where I’m standing, the strange ways in which past associative movements of my mind had rubbed up against Ann Arbor and led eventually in a circuitous way to my writing a novel.

When I was a child, the words “Ann Arbor” circulated in my home with much the same totemic power as “Watergate hearings.” My childhood home,
a single-story two-bedroom ranch in a subdivision called Miami Trails on the southern edge of South Bend, Indiana, was under-furnished or unusually furnished. The front room or what some call the parlor was totally empty. The den or what some call the television room—that dark chamber of the Watergate hearings—was furnished with green canvas butterfly-style patio chairs that more properly belonged in the yard. I don’t remember when it first came to my attention that those green canvas butterfly chairs had once lived in a rose garden somewhere in Ann Arbor. Somewhere in Ann Arbor, there had once been a white trellis heavy with pink climbing roses, the green canvas butterfly chairs, my slender and beautiful mother unfamiliarly scantily clad in a thin sleeveless blouse and a skort, my handsome smiling father unfamiliarly relaxed, even elated, with a pipe clamped in his dazzling white teeth. All these images were printed on small stiff rectangles of Kodak paper and housed in a just-the-right-size cardboard box which must have been supplied by the photo developer. Over the years the stack of photos had curled like a stack of Pringles potato chips, and this collectively altered shape, caused by damp, further accelerated the effectiveness of the damp in fusing the photos together so that attempts to separate them often ruined an image by leaving a ghostly white fuzz. In spite of these clear indications the photos were best left unviewed, at some point in my romantic teen years I pulled the stack apart, unavoidably damaging the photos in the process, and pasted them with old-fashioned photo corners into an album along with a number of other neglected photographs of what I had come to consider, with the narcissism so common and useful to writers, as my own and no one else’s early and prehistory. I was impelled by the archivist’s desire to preserve, and the historian’s desire to clarify and order, the past. Once I’d done the ordering and pasting I was satisfied and have rarely looked at those photos again. For me, the archival and historical impulses are straightforward and easily dealt with. They involve literal boxes or file folders or albums and have little to do with writing. In the archival and historical realms the case for those photos was literally closed. Yet in the darkness of the pond—remember the pond?—those photos were just getting started. They had embarked on a murky transformative life which was unknown to me. I had no awareness of it, control over it, or stake in it. In 1996, about a decade after I’d filed those photos in the album, the anonymous serial killer referred to by the press and the FBI as the Unabomber was arrested at his Montana
cabin and unveiled to the world as Theodore Kaczynski. Kaczynski was, among other things, a former classmate of my father’s in the mathematics doctoral program here at the University of Michigan. Into the pond he went, too. In the early 2000s, after the publication of my second novel, a fictionalization of the Patty Hearst kidnapping which had begun as a book about pirates, I went for a wintertime walk in the woods with my husband. I recall the thin crust of snow making a crunching sound under our boots. What if my father had known, I said then, perhaps out loud to my husband, perhaps to myself, who the Unabomber was, before the FBI did? And what if he had cared for him, too? Would he have exposed him? Would he have concealed him? The loneliness of a moral dilemma took hold of me on the wintertime trail. In dreams we often know, for reasons we can’t explain upon waking, that we’re in the grip of an emotional state. I dreamed I was newly in love. I dreamed I had been neglectful, and done harm. I dreamed I was bereaved—when I woke up I wept in relief that my grief wasn’t real. Novels are dreams in that they come together from unpredictable detritus, coalesced in unexpected ways, often imposing their emotional landscape in advance of whatever conditions might plausibly bring that emotional landscape about. The novelist, or at least, this novelist, generally gets to work in the wake of these manifestations, managing as best she can. Logic is retrofitted. Little is premeditated. What little is premeditated is usually invalidated. The moral dilemma I had imagined was soon discarded in favor of a Kafkaesque nightmare of false accusation. My novel about pirates on the high seas had turned into a novel about Patty Hearst in a landlocked mountain cabin, and my Hopwood Lecture about resisting the impulse to tell stories about telling stories has turned into a story in which the telling of stories is compared to the dreaming of dreams.

If the writing of novels is going to be compared with a mental process both involuntary and unconscious, certain practical questions arise. The first is, how do you know you’re not writing a novel? The answer here is pleasant and points to one of the great advantages of novel writing as a profession. You don’t know when you’re not working on it, because potentially, at any moment, you are. I might be working on my novel right now, although we’re not likely to know for at least half a decade. Every part of our lives is potentially part of our work. Everything is tax deductible, and nothing goes to waste. That it might become part of your novel suffuses with the glow of
artistic potentiality the broken shoelace, the search for parking, the line at
the bank. The other practical question is a little more confusing. How do
you know you are writing a novel? You might type for five hours every week-
day morning, or talk into your iPhone on the trails of Mount Monadnock
for days, and not produce one good page of your novel. You might write
an entire novel that proves useful only by the process of elimination, when
you realize there’s no single sentence of it that you want in your novel. But
despair-inducing as such experiences are, this too is writing your novel. It’s
stirring the pond with the stick. It’s setting detritus in motion, enabling un-
thought-of collision. It’s getting you there. And perhaps this is the one true
thing I believe about all writing, and all writers: that the writing itself gets
you there, when nothing else will. When I was much younger and aspired
to write, I did almost everything but just sit down and put words together. I
read the work of my heroes and heroines, I took brooding walks in pastoral
locales, I spoke at length and pretentiously about my ideas, I selected the
name of the bespoke publishing house I would found, and I even designed
its logo. I didn’t much write, due to a serious misconception of the nature
of language. I presumed an easy correlation between words and ideas, and
that the latter, the ideas, came first. I waited. Sometimes I did have an idea,
and then I tried to write it down and found that it never turned out how
I’d meant it. It was a long time before I had the first intuition that this
fundamental unruliness of language, this persistent failure of language to
coincide with our premeditations, this uncanny associative autonomy by
which language drags in, unbidden, the buried and the presumed dead and
the previously unknown and the seemingly irrelevant or irreverent or both,
is the very engine of creativity, the source of the good stuff, the pond and
the murk and the long stick which stirs it all up. It has happened to me
now, in the Naugahyde armchair in which I sit typing, gazing sightlessly out
the filthy street-facing windows into my own past ideas and predilections
and ambitions and childhood rooms. Putting these words together, pulling
them into shape and being equally pulled and not sure, even now, which side
has exerted superior force, I’ve found myself someplace I never expected to
go, both pleasantly afloat and half-drowned in my persistent metaphorical
pond.

Pulling and pulled; afloat and half-drowned; the untidy conundrum of
both controlling the writing and being controlled by it is one that never goes
away. It is, in fact, the desired condition, or at least it’s my desired condition, unenjoyable as it very often is to try and maintain it. Becoming accustomed to contradictory conditions can be useful. Maintaining the regimented hours and work habits of a clerk and at the same time the otherworldly receptivity of a shaman can be useful. Channeling the journalist’s insistence upon objectivity and at the same time the psychotherapist’s insistence that there’s no such thing as objectivity can be useful. Being certain no one matters more than you and also certain no one matters less than you can be useful. While I was writing my partly inspired by Ann Arbor novel I never understood why in my writing I sometimes made things up whole cloth and other times borrowed them unaltered from the FBI playbook, why in my research I sometimes avoided historical accounts of the Unabomber and at other times went out of my way to interview one of the very men who took the Unabomber into custody. I never understood why those pictures of my parents meant so much to me that I refused to look at them. The lack of rationale for the way I pieced the book together is probably the only rationale I used. I spoke at the start of my feeling of being a fraud whenever I’m asked to talk about writing. But fraudulence implies an authentic and honest condition, from which the fraud deviates, usually with malice aforethought and the intention to gain through deceit. My sense of being a fraud presupposes a true way of being a writer, a true way of writing, that for all my fear of fraudulence I am willing to claim doesn’t exist. What do exist are Mary Gordon’s way and Flannery O’Connor’s, J. D. McClatchy’s way and Joan Didion’s, mine, and yours. Though an inventory of the disparate this may be, there’s no solitude in it. We write alone but our endeavor is collective. There is no solitude in writing any more than there is solitude in meaning.

Spending many days, as I have, trying to tell a story about storytelling has made me impatient to just tell a story. My father’s father died in Seoul, Korea, in 1964, while my parents were living here in Ann Arbor. All my life until recently I’ve known only that my paternal grandfather was an eminent writer and scholar in Korea who suffered many reversals and died very young. Although he was known for having translated authors ranging from Shakespeare to Theodore Dreiser from English into Korean, he only left one publication in English, a study of Shakespeare. I learned of it in the late 1990s, after I’d dropped out of Cornell University’s doctoral program in English and moved to New York. I’d gone to Cornell to study English
not to emulate my grandfather but to stave off student loans and bewilderment, and I’d been very unhappy there and was both relieved and ashamed to drop out. It solaced me to hang out at the New York Public Library and pretend to be doing research, and that was how, several years into my time in New York, I came across a mention of my grandfather’s book, though not the book itself. For some time after that I looked for a used copy online, and finally gave up. A part of me held back from trying too hard. I don’t read or speak Korean, and this inability made me vaguely ashamed to hotly pursue my grandfather’s sole English publication, as if I might not deserve it. Over the years additional information about my grandfather sifted into my life, although never that one book of his I might read. In 2014 I traveled to Seoul, and while there decided to visit Yonsei University, where my grandfather had been at some point on the English faculty. Googling to try and determine the years he had taught, I stumbled on an announcement for a lecture that had been given the previous week about my grandfather, at Ghent University in Belgium. Writing to Ghent I was put in touch with the lecturer, a professor from Japan named Yoshi Mihara, who explained to me that he’d become interested in my grandfather while pursuing his doctorate in the Department of English at Cornell University. Yoshi had arrived just a few years after I left. While writing a paper on T. S. Eliot he’d come across a reference to a Korean literary critic he’d never heard of whose single work of criticism in English turned out to be in the collection of Cornell’s library—along with the master’s thesis I had left behind. Yoshi checked out my grandfather’s book, which hadn’t been checked out for the previous twenty-four years, including three years during which I’d spent most hours of most days in that library, suffering acutely from not knowing what I was doing. Yoshi checked the book out in 2004 and photocopied it in its entirety, so that ten years later he was able to email it to me. Perhaps it’s a sign of my age, but the multipage pdf file, astonishing as its instantaneous materialization in my inbox was, somehow, not enough. Last month, I traveled back to Cornell, applied for library privileges, and checked the book out myself, the first person to have done so since Yoshi. I might have checked it out legitimately, but walking out of the Cornell library with that book in my backpack felt to me like a heist. My grandfather died just before his book was published in 1965. The book begins with these words:
Just before the Korean War in 1950, I said before my class, as if from some presentiment, that, if any calamity befell us and we all were to evacuate the capital, I should carry with me only two books, the C.O.D. and the Works of Shakespeare. When I left Seoul, as I foretold, on Christmas morning, there was contained in my traps another book, Onions’ Glossary. In Taegoo, my place of refuge, I began to read Shakespeare’s plays, among which were many that I had read only once. With only a compendious glossary as aid, naturally I had to read closely and think intensively. I could find in my toil, however, an inexpressible joy and consolation that I had not tasted before. I felt life worth still living, and had great zest in those days of deprivation and disorder. I reaffirmed then the truth that literature is the organizing of experiences, the ordering of emotions.
Water clarity is a major concern for all pond owners. We offer these suggestions for keeping your pond crystal clear. 1. Clean out any leaves, mulch, and any other debris that has collected in the pond. As the natural materials decompose they provide nutrients that feed algae.