

**PERFORMING SURGERY WITHOUT  
ANESTHESIA**

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**CHRIS OFFUTT**

A WHILE BACK, I was teaching a class in which the average age was, I believe, twenty-three. And so I thought I'd go back through my files—because I compulsively save everything—and look at the stories I'd written when I was twenty-three. I chose the best one out of a lousy bunch. There were three characters, two guys and a woman—a love triangle. One of the guys was a drug smuggler; I thought that was pretty cool. The setting was a bar, which I also thought was very cool. But as I re-read the story, I was astounded. Nothing happened. The characters sat in a bar. The action consisted only of drinking, smoking, leaning, and looking; the rest of the time they talked.

I realize now that what I was doing then was refusing to revise. I didn't know how. I was afraid of it. I was polishing; I wasn't revising. The result was a highly polished second draft that was just as junky as the original. To be a successful writer you have to develop two skills that are polar opposites: generating a first draft and revising. The first draft requires an unbelievable subjectivity;

you pour all your emotions into it, you stake your life on every word, you make yourself completely vulnerable on the page. You write in that white-hot heat like a drug experience. Every time I start something new I'm terrified that it's going to be no good, that I can't write anymore, that I've lost it. I experience extreme self-consciousness. But if I commit to the process and engage in it, at some point the self-consciousness and the terror dissipate and the story kicks in. What I try to do in a first draft is to follow every impulse. I throw everything but the kitchen sink into the narrative, then I throw in the kitchen sink, fill it with dishes, turn on the water, and let it overflow. By then, I have become enthused by it, I stay up late, I don't go to the bathroom, I don't eat, I drink more coffee (maybe then I go the bathroom, I guess). Then I become aware that I am approaching the ending, and that's another situation that is fraught with anxiety because I don't want it to end. I've been living with these people for a while—I know them and feel close to them. They're like guests I hope will stay longer. Plus, finishing means I will have to start all over again with the terror of something new. So I continue until at some point I realize I've got to write an end scene. And I think, "I've got to write an end line, a killer end line, a glittering, lyrical, beautiful, charming end line that reverberates all the way back through the story." And I do, and that end line has nothing to do with the story, but it sure does look good. It's like a beautiful gigantic neon sign that says: ENDING!

By the end I believe that I've written something absolutely brilliant—probably the best thing I've ever written, maybe better than anything anyone's ever written. I love that feeling; it lasts until the next morning, when I look at the work again and realize

it's a piece of crap. I feel bad for that, but I feel even worse for having thought it was so brilliant. For me, that's pretty much the process of generating a first draft. I think it's important to feel that way, even though I now know it's a false genius. Still, I get to feel that "geniusness" briefly. Overnight. A sleeping genius.

The process of revision is drastically different. It is draining the sink and seeing what's in there, which is usually a mess. Revising requires a cruel and ruthless objectivity with which you essentially perform surgery on *yourself* without anesthesia. In order to have something successful to revise, you must make yourself vulnerable on the page, particularly in the first draft. The more you make yourself vulnerable—you make yourself personally vulnerable on the page—the more you're going to care about what you're doing (and if you don't care about it, you may as well hang it up) and the more you're going to reach the reader. If you make yourself vulnerable, that vulnerability will translate into empathy—reader empathy. So if you've done the first part of the job correctly, you are emotionally engaged at a deep level with the first draft and there is no way you can go back into it and revise successfully because you care too much about it, you're too engaged. So then, how do you develop the skill of cruel and ruthless objectivity?

One of the ways that I do it is to go away from the work, leave it alone. If you get some distance and time from the first draft, you can look at it objectively. It's the same with a broken heart. Think about it: a little distance and time will heal your broken heart; a little distance and time will allow you to look at a draft and figure out what it is you're doing. After finishing the first draft I'll look through it and fix the surface errors. I make it

semi-legible and correct the punctuation, spelling, and grammar. I often change the names. Then I print it out and put it away for a while.

After that, the only way for me to disengage emotionally in order to obtain the necessary objectivity is to write something new. I'm always working on multiple projects—this serves the overall work. It's not because I can't finish anything or I'm unfocused. When I start another story and become emotionally engaged with that one, then I can return to earlier ones and look at them on their own terms.

I think the word *revision* means *to see again* or *to look again*. Most people don't do that; as I've said, they polish. You must learn to re-see your work. And that often means noticing what the story is really about, what it's become. Not what you thought it was, or what you wanted it to be.

Here's a mistake a lot of writers make: You say to yourself, "I'm trying to write a father-son story, and so I'm going to keep focusing on that because that was my plan." It doesn't matter what you were trying to write. You have to be able to look at the first draft and see what it has developed into on its own. Maybe the father winds up being more interesting and the story is focused on him, but you've written it from the son's point of view. Well, you have to recognize that and say, "Ok. Time to shift the focus. Time to make it about the father rather than the son."

Try to see what the story is, rather than what you are trying to force it into. If you've done that first draft successfully, you've tapped into your intuition, your impulses, your unconscious, your problems of the day, whatever emotional state you're in. It's there; it has translated into prose on the page. Now you need to

forget what it is you've tried to do, look at the story, see what it has become, and begin to attempt to fix it, to revise it, to improve it. I was always afraid to revise, because I was afraid I would make a story worse. But I've learned that it's possible to improve a story and that I can't make it worse, because I can always go back to the way it was.

I've developed a system for the revision process that may or may not work for you, but it's systematic and makes the task a little easier. Once I finish a draft, I print it out. I don't mess with it. I number and date it. I revise it with pen on that copy. I put those changes into the electronic file. Then I put the hard copy into a folder in a drawer. I print the version with the changes and label it: draft two, with a date. I revise that draft in pen and put the changes into the electronic file. I continue this process over time, months and years.

As a result I always have the current draft on the computer and all prior drafts at my disposal arranged chronologically. Many times, at draft ten or twelve I'm completely lost; I have no idea what's going on. I've cut it, I've changed it, I've chopped it, I've shortened it, I've opened it up. I've lost track of what's going on. So I go back to that first draft, the one in the drawer, to see what is happening. Very often I will bring a lot of the earlier ideas back into the story. Having multiple drafts on the computer is not as successful as you'd think. First of all, you've got to remember which draft is which. Secondly, you can't open up more than one or two on the screen and have any luck keeping track of them. At least, I can't. That doesn't work for me.

In the early stage of revision, you need to look at structure, point of view, plot, flashback, and exposition. These are just a few

elements—there are probably more—but these are the big ones that you must examine and make sure, before you go forward, that they're serving the story, not the writer. Many, many stories collapse because the writer is trying to make it easier on himself. Don't do that. Serve the story. Writers are smart people facing a tough job. Writers are smart enough to figure out shortcuts, but you must avoid this impulse. There are no shortcuts in art.

Once you get the early decisions squared away, trim the opening. One of the first things I do is cut the first few pages because in those pages I'm preparing to write, I'm priming the pump of narrative, I'm doing calisthenics. It's crucial to figure out where a story takes off. I'm sure you've heard people say, "Ah, the story really takes off for me on page four." Well, there's your opening. There's nothing worse than having a thirty-five-page story and people say, "Really, I love it. It begins on page thirty-two." I've done that, and they were right. Those first thirty-two pages were me warming up. Beginnings get bogged down, which is natural because in the process of writing and revising you always start at the beginning and work through to the end, so the beginning receives more attention. I also often cut the last half page to two pages because they have nothing to do with the story. The actual narrative—the story proper—has already happened. I have cut thousands of pages from my work, but those cut pages were necessary to the final draft. To me, the final product is like an iceberg: you only see ten percent of the actual work, but that other ninety percent is still there.

Each time you approach a story and read it to yourself to try and revise it, you know what's supposed to happen, you anticipate

what's going to happen within your own story. When you start doing that it becomes difficult to look at the work objectively: "Oh I'm coming up on the action scene—okay—I'm going to start reading faster, it doesn't matter, I love the action part, I'm not going to bear down on the language or the sentences quite as hard." Look at your sentences very carefully—look at the consistency of tone, style, and language and vary your sentence structure. Do whatever it takes to keep the sentences hopping and to avoid monotony.

On a structural level, change the order of scenes. Move things around. Switch the opening and closing and see what happens. Do you have a linear structure or a circular structure? Why do you have that one, and does it serve the story? Does it serve the situation? If there's not a lot of action or much of the story is set inside the main character's head, then circular may be more effective. But if it's a story about a guy who has a fight with his boss, steals a car, and robs a 7-Eleven, then linear might be better. Combine characters—that's another trick I do constantly. If you have too many, the narrative becomes ungainly. When I have too many characters, I combine two into one and suddenly the new character has more dimension. Avoid too much exposition: stories get bogged down by exposition. Writers are writers, which means we're constantly writing notes to ourselves as we write: we write about what we're going to write, we write about what's going to happen, we write comments about the characters, etc. But you don't need all that information in the final draft. These are notes to the self that are valuable to the writing process, but they interfere with the narrative. I worked on a father-son story in which I started with the grandparents and the great grandfather. Finally, after years, I

realized I only needed to write about the father and the son; I didn't need their family lineage in there. It was important for me personally to understand them, but not for making a piece of art. I'm not saying these are rules; I just think that to get going in this difficult activity, you can simplify some things. You can make it easier on yourself, especially in the early stages. I don't mean shortcuts! I mean lessen the burden you bear during the process.

After six months or five years, you might have something worthwhile and you can start polishing, by which I mean making sure you've got the right verb, cutting out words that repeat, making sure you don't have two similes in the same short paragraph. If you've used adverbs, look at them carefully. Adverbs are the weakest words; verbs are the strongest. Many, many times I've found that I have the wrong verb so I'm attempting to cheat and modify the wrong verb by using an adverb.

I rely on the first draft to see what it is I'm writing about. The first draft is a difficult step in order to have something to play with. Then I look at it objectively, see what the story has become, and revise it. As a result of committing to writing and trying to operate from this standpoint, I'm not afraid of revision anymore. In fact I prefer it. I have one story with drafts that run back eighteen years—but it's getting better.

And one final tip: just write. There are no rules. Experiment and learn. Don't pay any attention to someone who tells you what you should be doing.

## (MIS)ADVENTURES IN POETRY

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D. A. POWELL

SO MUCH OF the time, new poets are looking for the proper turn of phrase, the way to translate their ideas into poems—they reach after metaphors that will approximate a sense of the world as close as possible to their own experience. But often it's the inexact, the awful, the mistaken linguistic turn that manages to say the right thing because it unmoors us from our perceived relationship to the subject about which we're trying to write. Often, poetry is enriched by saying precisely what we didn't set out to say.

What is the hidden light of discovery within the poem? Have we given the reader a new experience of the world through language? In a letter to Robert Creeley, William Carlos Williams wrote that "bad art is . . . that which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language upon all fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past. Sanitation and hygiene or sanitation that we may have hygienic writing." The poet's job is to clean up words so that they appear fresh and new in the context of the poem. Etel Adnan said once in conversation that