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THE ART OF CREATIVE RESEARCH

BY JOHN GERRARD

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THE ART OF CREATIVE RESEARCH

A Field Guide for Writers

PHILIP GERARD

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PROLOGUE: ON FIRE FOR RESEARCH

(AN HOMAGE TO LARRY BROWN)

I have chosen this thing to do, away from my family, the doors closed, characters who form in my head and move to the paper, black symbols on a white sheet, no more than that. It may seem senseless to anybody else, but I know there is a purpose to my work. . . .—Larry Brown, *On Fire*

I love getting in my car in the predawn darkness, watching the dashboard glow blue and silver and red as I turn the ignition, feel the neighborhood stillness all around me.

They're all asleep, my neighbors, and I'm awake and stealing away on an adventure. I back out of the driveway slowly and roll up the street, the GPS beaming on the dashboard, toward a destination two hundred miles away, where I will talk to a stranger—an old moonshiner, who, in his wild youth, drove fast cars down twisting midnight roads on the adventure of his life—and hope that he will tell me what he knows and I need to know, some clue that will help me make sense of the history of half a million restless people and their descendants. And I don't even know what that is.

It's the *not* knowing that always gets me, the surprise waiting at the end of the road. I love the feeling of excitement tinged with anxiety, the anticipation of a new encounter, of knowing that by day's end I will be rocketing back home along country roads with the goods in my notebook, my digital recorder, my camera, to be unpacked and

mulled over and formed into words that will create an experience in the imaginations of strangers, sometime in the indeterminate future.

Maybe. With a little luck.

If I am good enough to make it happen.

And I love it that sometimes I am good enough to make it happen.

I love the moment when someone tells me something he or she never intended to say, the look of wonder and discovery in their eyes, the smiling tears of memory, the clutch in the throat that carries all the story you'll ever need to hear. The pang of good-bye, leaving a stranger who has just confided his most precious secret, hoping you will honor it—I don't love that, I never get used to that. Yet afterward, how I do cherish the memory of it.

Every conversation is a story, and every story is an adventure, and every adventure takes me out of my small life into a larger one, and I love that. I love that it catapults me out into the world, outdoors, in all seasons, to places I have only dreamed of going—or maybe never dreamed of going—places where they speak in different accents, different languages even. Where the air smells different, and the skyline is unfamiliar, and the landscape is a brand-new map.

I love finding historical markers on remote country lanes, pulling to the side of the road and stepping into weeds brushed by an October wind. Then walking up a long winding path to ground where something has been fought over, decided, the struggle mapped into the ground: earthworks, entrenchments, graves.

I love the hush of those deserted places, those old battlefields, always so breathtaking, as if we, as a species, have decided to struggle only in beautiful places. And listening to the ghosts moan among the last leaves of autumn, seeing their shapes rise up in uniforms: Union blue, Confederate gray, British red and scarlet, the motley of Revolutionary militias, the painted flesh of Iroquois.

There is treasure in the ground—the body of British General Edward Braddock, haughty and dismissive, cut down by ambush in the Pennsylvania woods, buried secretly and the grave tracked over by his surviving troops so it could never be found and desecrated.

The things that men dropped in their frenzy to retreat— they're

in the ground, too: bullets and swords and muskets and haversacks. It is all there still, and their voices rise on the wind, an eternal chorus. Just as at Cowpens and Guilford Courthouse, Antietam and Gettysburg, Manassas and the little village of Aversboro, North Carolina, where the unknown Confederate dead are fenced into a little flat graveyard—barefoot boys from Alabama and Mississippi and Georgia who were still fighting after Robert E. Lee’s surrender and never made it home.

On a transatlantic trip hunting the ghosts of World War II soldiers, on Omaha beach at Normandy, I walk from the gray rumbling sea across a broad pebbled bar to the first hump of sandy cover, feel the steep distance in my legs, slip a smooth pebble into my pocket, a hard nugget of memory. How did men ever cross that ground and live?

Later I climb a rocky village churchyard among miniature stone sepulchres, the repositories of children dead from the Black Death. The tiny sepulchres are fitted into the crowded graveyard like puzzle pieces.

In Poland I climb a long hill called Jasna Gora, Hill of Light, to reach the fortified monastery at the top. In the year 1655, beset by an invading army of 10,000 Swedes, the monastery was saved by the intercession of the Black Madonna—captured in an image painted by St. Luke on a tabletop built by Jesus of Nazareth himself and displayed inside the cathedral.

So they say.

Now on the Feast of the Assumption, a high mass is being celebrated on the parapet by a score of bishops, monsignors, priests, and acolytes. Tens of thousands of pilgrims are climbing the hill on their knees—old men in tattered wool suits, nuns in black Reeboks, school-girls wearing bright badges identifying their schools. I reach a door in the wall, for some lucky reason unlocked, and enter. A stone staircase brings me to the parapet, a few yards from the mass, and I gaze out over a crowd that can be measured in acres. I love that moment on the parapet, peering out into the Middle Ages.

And I love libraries and the still windowless rooms of Special

Collections—even the name is exciting: *Special Collections*, an invitation to view the extraordinary. Letters are the best—love letters, letters of regret or exultation, scolding letters, letters asking for a new shirt, boots that aren't rotten, candy, fresh eggs. A letter of reply. The thin brittle paper under my linen gloves is stained with sweat and coffee and dew and whiskey and tobacco juice and blood. The handwriting is curlicued and cramped and at times illegible, enlivened by whimsical spelling and inky devil's teardrops dotting each "i." Some give off a faint whiff of mildew or tobacco or perfume.

And I love opening the diary of a young soldier fresh from a horrific battle and watching a dried flower fall out—proof that the meadow where he camped was blooming, a moment of promise amid the madness.

And the stern sepia portraits in the deck of cartes-de-visite, a whole regiment's worth, taken just before going into battle the next day, when the regiment would be wiped out almost to a man.

I love the weight of old objects in my hands: a rosewood and spruce parlor guitar made by hand in the 1890s, the brass field glasses my grandfather owned for no good reason, the bone saw used by a Civil War surgeon, some colonial farmer's rude-handled shovel or ax, the rusty shackles that once bound a slave. I love exploring forts and old houses and ruined factories, crawling through a World War II bomber whose passages are so tight that it must have been designed for miniature men, and descending into a played-out copper mine in Arizona on a narrow-gauge railroad into eternal darkness.

And dioramas—how I love those! The miniature towns with their railroads and harbors, their lighted windows and tiny citizens frozen in the act of unloading a barge or cutting firewood or hanging laundry on a backyard line.

And topographical tables, how the mountains rise out of the plain and the river valley cuts a canyon. Scale models, how cool are they? A whole roomful of windjammers at the Smithsonian, a railroad layout complete with a working carnival at an old freight shed on the Erie Canal. And the dim secretive museum light, like the stingy light inside a haunted house.

And reenactments, actors dressed in period costume, all their accessories so ridiculous and quaint and real. I love the ammoniac smell of their horses and the reek of old saddle leather and the acrid burn of black powder gun smoke wafting across the meadow.

At a museum in Maryland, I walk among antique fire engines, gaudy as circus wagons, their company names scrolled in gold leaf, their steam boilers decorated in vivid oil-painted tableaux of heroism. An old fireman docent sounds an antique alarm, and the switchboard inside the alarm house lights up and sends its signal out to all the right stations, ranged along the walls. On the flickering kinescope, a team of horses that have been dead for a century wheels into harness at the sound of a silent bell and heave the engine out the double doors of the firehouse in a herky-jerky motion, a little spotted dog leaping aboard at the last second. I want to go to that long-ago fire with them. I want to buckle on a canvas turnout coat and leather helmet and feel the heat and listen to the little dog yap with joy at the flames.

I want to be where all the important moments of history happened: Runnymede, Old North Church, the Alamo, Independence Hall, Appomattox Court House, the Bennett Farm—where the Civil War really came to an end.

I love standing at a table where something important was signed, like a surrender.

I love the little notebooks that fit in my back pocket, bound with an elastic band, the fistful of pens that snug into a row of khaki sleeves like spare cartridges, the camera and digital recorder and snacks and water bottle that live in my vest when I know I will be in the field for a long day. And don't forget the binoculars, how I love them! They help me see what is invisible—a bald eagle soaring above the tree line, a house snuggled into the distant mountainside, and far out at sea, a breaching whale. Like the magnifying glass in my pocket that reveals the soft indentation of a fountain pen nib on rag paper, and the spotlight in the console of my SUV that illuminates addresses and turn-offs at night on unfamiliar country roads.

The SUV is a rolling office, and I love packing it for any emer-

gency, any adventure: spare batteries, first aid kit, hazard lights, jumper cables, tools, a spare toiletry kit, bottled water and blankets, foul weather gear, even a harmonica in the glove compartment to pass the slow times.

At highway rest stops, I can't help but wonder where everyone else has come from and where they are bound: the chic couple in the red convertible sports car, the rowdy family with all the wild kids pouring out of the camper, the pensive loner hurrying back from the restroom with his hands jammed tight in his windbreaker pockets. I want to get in all their cars with them and go someplace else, anywhere but here, and find out why: Why are they going? What's waiting at the end of the road?

I never watch a boat shove off from a dock without wanting to climb aboard, never see a canoe disappear around a river bend without wanting to paddle after it, never see the contrail of an airplane overhead without wondering who is aboard and where they are going and why, and wishing I was going somewhere too. And often enough, I do climb aboard—ships, planes, trucks, trains, kayaks, my own two legs—and rattle off on an adventure that will someday live on pages.

After the adventure, I love going somewhere quiet and just listening to the world be quiet, the story settling on me like grace, or like a snowfall, accumulating weight and shape and even beauty.

The words are already there, buckets of them, notebooks full of them. They're in my ears, a hubbub of words, and when I make it home again, they will visit my dreams, as will the faces and the stony churchyard and the wooded path to a hidden grave and old rough-handled tools and the souging breeze that sounds like spirits awake and restless among the trees.

I love all that, and the words are already trying to find my fingers, trying to turn fact and impression and color and tone of voice into something true—as in straight, plumb, level, and square, a carpenter's truth.

That's what this thing is for me, this thing the scholars call *research*.

That's the thing I want you to share—the adventure of finding out

and the excitement of turning that knowledge into the right words to somehow touch your reader, a stranger, who follows and trusts you, and somehow was always there at your side on that airplane, in that archive, on that river, sharing that weather, during that interview.

And it doesn't really matter what genre you choose to work in. The thrill is the same whether it results in an authentic poem or a true-crime book or a personal essay or a novel. Knowing about the world with specific accuracy changes everything about the creative process. It enlarges the borders of your imagination exponentially, allowing you to write about science, history, the natural world, society, politics, medicine, business, technology, personal relationships, and human nature in ways that will delight and surprise both you and your reader—which is, after all, the point.

Research can take you to that golden intersection where the personal meets the public, the private crosses the universal, where the best literature lives. It is deeply rooted in the writer's heart, yet blossoms out into a larger thing that includes the world.

It's a lot of work, and it takes some gumption, but it sure is a thrill.

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1 WHAT CREATIVE RESEARCH IS AND HOW TO USE IT

The only things I can't write about are things that I am ignorant about, and that can always be changed. —Jacob Bateman, poet

Somewhere in our schooling, the idea of research got separated from our creative impulse. The kids who went into science do research. Maybe the historians and social scientists, too. And, of course, we all suffered through writing the required “research” paper in high school or college, in which we rounded up a specified number of reputable sources to splint the bones of our argument. And maybe journalists need to quote sources for the sake of credibility. But poets? Novelists? Personal essayists? Don't we just reach deep into the well of our imaginations and subconscious minds and produce art? Well, not exactly. Sometimes it's not enough simply to peer intently into your own soul. Sometimes you have to look out the window and see the world in all its complicated glory.

Think of Rita Dove's haunting book of poems, *Thomas and Beulah*, based on the lives of her African American grandparents. True, she achieves poetic power by imagining herself into their lives and by creating a living sense of them for us on the page. But to do that, she first had to discover all she could about them. Her declared intent was to remind us that these were *real* people, that their lives actually hap-

pened and were not just artistic constructs, that those lives contained both mystery and beauty along with hardship and suffering. Drawing from the actual known details of their lives would honor them. Think, too, of Carolyn Forché's mesmerizing book of poems, *The Country Between Us*, based on her experience on the ground during the time of the death squads and impending war in El Salvador, using poetry to try to understand the savagery she witnessed—and make it known to the world in a more powerful and lasting form than a daily news story.

Lavonne J. Adams had published scores of personally inspired poems before she wrote an enchanting cycle of poems about women on the Santa Fe Trail, *Through the Glorieta Pass*—a breakthrough experience that opened up a whole new dimension in her poetry. A simple assignment that she gave to her poetry class prodded her to venture so far afield in search of subject matter—an assignment designed to jar students away from writing only what was familiar and comfortable. She describes the experience this way:

Students of poetry, in the initial stages of the development of their craft, often write about their own experiences, which is an unarguable means of claiming authority in the writing. During a semester in which an intermediate workshop group shared an inordinate number of poems about romance-gone-awry, I pondered ways that I might encourage them to consider other topics. I wondered if shifting from subjects in which they had a strong emotional stake, to others that might be less personally inspired or traumatic, would allow these poets the distance that they need to focus on craft. My hypothesis was that they could then return to more personal poetry with greater insight and mastery over imagery, language, voice, and form.

Adams goes on, "The assignment was simple: choose a topic and research, write a poem about that topic. I began to write in this vein along with my students, delighted in the temporary liberation from my own life, or thoughts on life in general, within my poetry."

Like so many writers, Adams often finds that the surprises, even