

## A FORGOTTEN RIVER CALLED THE NICKEL VLY

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I stood with a yellow plastic air horn jammed between my legs. My sound kit rested on a table draped with black cloth: two yogurt cups on a bed of gravel, a laptop with a broken backlight, a toy cell phone, some potatoes, a popcorn tin filled with shards of glass, and an empty water bottle. At my elbow was a stage full of kids dressed as gazelles.

Baby Gazelle cradled its mama. Mother shuddered, raising her neck to meet its teary gaze. My job was to bring the environment to life through live sound effects, and at the climax, render the low cry of Mother Gazelle as she passed from the world, using the yellow plastic air horn. If my lips pursed off-center or welled from a bit of spit, the moment was lost forever. Not because I would fail to make a sound. But because that sound (the instrument only makes two) would instead be that of a wet, juicy fart. The amplifiers and cross-overs hummed above my head, waiting to let it ring.

Earlier that day, I had slogged up to Van Nuys to deliver pornography to a TV studio. I was told to knock on 4C and ask for Oren. Oren was a large, hairy man with flaring sideburns that swept the sides of his face. He gave me a videotape in a blue case, which I took back to my van. All day I hopped in and out of air-conditioned

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rooms. I drove from the soundstage where I worked to post houses and dub suites, tucked away in old motels with sound insulation stuffed into the walls, or in donut shops with unplugged signs behind rows of orange trees.

Los Angeles. I worked by day for an adult entertainment empire. By night, I was a sound designer for a children's theatre company. It was a beautiful city, filled with fresh flavors and textures. It was sunny and sad. L.A. lacked institutional memory, its ebbs and flows, like its staple industry, impermanent. I trained as a screenwriter, but I found that the work was scarce. I was haunted by a kind old neighbor who showed me a long hallway of scripts he had written and been paid handsomely for. A life's work, never produced. In certain circles, I'm told, he was highly regarded. To me, he was a translucent specter, mustering his craft for an audience of conference rooms.

I'm going to work backwards now. There's these things I do for a living (mostly writing). The things I write are produced by muscles. The muscles are made up of experiences. The experiences are made up of collective definitions. The collective definitions are made by people. I discovered this one day when I was very young and wandered into the forest near the Nickel Vly.

I was hired for the sound design job because of my interest in radio drama and my experience in college tinkering with audio. I had a degree in screenwriting, too, which meant I could create or manipulate a sound, and then place it within a narrative to advance the story. I grew my skills from a 4-track recorder in my childhood bedroom, cross-legged on shag carpet, to a college recording studio, to a black box theatre with a yellow plastic air horn.

These events detonated each other through a common mechanism my ability to say yes a little bit more than I've said no. I took classes and taught myself things and waded through internships and messy jobs. But the one piece of the toolkit that has moved me forward the most is an ability to say yes. And sometimes I wonder what would have happened had I said it more often. My career has unfolded along a ramble, but it moved because someone took a chance

on me, and I said yes even though I was afraid to. If you want to do these things, say yes often. I write grants now. It's not that different from screenwriting or sound effects. They're made of the same stuff.

I didn't pick writing out of a brochure. It came naturally from my behavior. A defense mechanism that became inseparable from life, and a livelihood emerged from it. The choice that I did make was about the shape of my daily routine. Each occupation has its own morphology. Where you fit in depends a lot on the hours you wish to keep. The hardest thing, starting off, is not deciding what activities you're interested in pursuing, but instead, what shape of day suits you. You might never know until you encounter it. Bear in mind, my job is different from my work. My work is writing and performing, which I do all the time. The job, on the other hand, is simply a container for some of the writing that shapes my day. I draw my raw ingredients for these tasks from experiences. I form them with tools using my hands.

I know how to lay a bead of weld on a piece of iron. I know what it feels like to press my hand over the air intake of a tractor to choke the engine as it spews hot oil out of a dented exhaust stack. I recall the sound of a philharmonic playing in a cool night. Or the soft rustle of paper in a storage room as I look for an old book. The lathe on which I shape these experiences is called narrative.

Creative work seems like the spinning of something from nothing. But it has very concrete structures that build real things, objects, systems, results. There are usually two sides to any art—the public face that is seen by others, and the private mechanics clicking behind Duvetyne drapes. Writing is one of the places where they converge, where the blueprint and the dabs of color are the same action. The dancers on stage. The flyman in back. There's engine grease on these fingers, there's pipes and wrenches and sockets and electrons making things flow. We're cooking up a batch of hydrogen from a bucket of washing soda and a car battery. We're doing two things at once—the ephemeral and the tangible living together, dogs and cats, the brim-

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stone end of the world and the dawn of a dewy new morning.

My neighbor in L.A. traveled restlessly. He spent his life criss-crossing North America in a station wagon with a polyester blanket. He told me how he liked to sleep underneath his car in the corner of a Denny's parking lot, because nobody ever notices a person underneath a car in a Denny's parking lot.

Sometimes he would put on an old tuxedo and go down to the Disney Concert Hall. "My friend couldn't make it; she had the tickets with her," he'd say to strangers. "Does anyone have an extra ticket for me?" A kind old lady would always come by, holding a ticket from an absent friend. He had nothing but the means to tell a story, and that story changed the world around him. This is an example of how we define the reality we live in. Everybody knows about the two parts of reality, the subjective and the objective. But I work primarily in a third, seldom-noticed, realm. The socio-subjective.

The world as we know it is not constructed by what our hands touch or by the emotions that wash over us. It is constructed by what we collectively define to each other. Pain, love, and barbecue are things that we associate with objects, people, and feelings. Memories, too. But a love is never of nothing. A pain is never a pain in nothing. A memory is never a memory of nothing. In the essence of writing, the degree to which we understand this is the degree to which we are free to control art or ideas or whatever.

Barbecue is an abstract concept. A bunch of people got together and gave it a name and defined what it is and isn't, generally speaking. They gave it a social context and forged an agreement upon which to proceed. And this pact transmits outward and grows and evolves and forms local divergent chapters.

Thus, when our eyes see a lump of brisket that's been smoking over coals for five hours, we understand that it is, indeed. Barbecue. Thank heavens for that. We're good at not noticing this third plank, because to notice it perfectly would be to step outside of our own perspectives, and that is very hard to do. Why does it matter?

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Because what I do on a daily basis, whether in fiction, or a grant narrative, or onstage in a scene or song, is not a trick. It's a usage of the structures of meaning. I first glimpsed them at this one spot about a mile beyond the big house where I grew up.

There is a small river out back called the Nickel Vly, and you won't find it on a cheap map, but you might find it on a very old one. It flows along an apocalyptic landscape, where a hundred years ago the economy veered away from agriculture. One by one the family farms wound down and the trees closed in. Acres of forests concealed the litter of human remains. A spinning tractor tire once rutted on an overturned headstone to reveal a lost family graveyard. A deer trail led to a dug well near a stone ice dam.

One of my favorite things back then was to ride in the back of our steel-wheeled cart as my dad chopped wood. Along one trail was a special treat — the skeleton of an old manure spreader. "What did you do today?" "I went to the old manure spreader!" I imagined this is what other children did. In reality, they were playing ColecoVision. Beyond the manure spreader was a cliff. One day, left on my own, I wandered off, wading through Canadian yews to peek over the edge. Below, I saw a sliver of water that flowed through a ravine. An ancient road led down the cliff to a bridge. I followed it to the source, a crater-like pond filled with dark, green liquid. A steep hill surrounded it on three sides, shaded by hemlocks. Along the slope was a dump; a defunct, exposed landfill with mounds of detritus. Bottles, machines, household debris, and signs and toy trains and rusted metal, snowed in by the sawtooth leaves of American hornbeams. There I found my playground.

These were ghosts and ruins of a lost civilization. Even the trees were scarred, with rusted barbed wire running through the middle, or pockmarks from taps and sap buckets. The stone laneways led from the woods to the fields with boneyards of horse-drawn farm machinery: hay rakes and mowers, drillers, harvesters, loaders, fillers, threshers, reapers, binders, shuckers, winnowers, and planters. On

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their own, these are perfectly normal things for a 1900s farm. But I was stranded there outside of time and I felt lost and alone.

Every day I bused from our rural hamlet into a small city, and once we passed the town lines, the bus stopped at the East End and picked up the city kids. They were poor. They were loud and aggressive. They assaulted me. As they knocked my head against the glass windows, thoughts rattled around in there about what was hidden back in the country under thatches of dead grass or beneath forest leaves. The woods and fields were not what they seemed. My schoolmates took it for granted that things had always been the way they were. I was too young to understand, but I had discovered that my classmates and I did not see the same reality around us. I thought I was crazy. My teachers weren't much help.

They just told me that the wild grapes and black raspberries were poison. (They are, in fact, delicious). After school, I trudged out into the woods and traced the route back to the dark pond. I unearthed artifacts and discovered strange devices buried in the earth. Rusted beer cans crunched beneath my feet. These things must have been put there for a reason. I did not know what that reason was, so I made it up.

Like the earliest humans, who devised mythology to explain the mysteries of nature, I devised stories and characters, entire histories, to explain the landscape as I saw it. They gave context to a world I didn't understand. They brought order to chaos. People, represented in token objects like action figures and dolls and pieces of trash, led remarkable lives in my imagination. They lived and died. They fought and conquered. Tragedy struck. A rainy basement became Noah's flood. The ice dam became a rampart for an Alamo. I made these stories to protect myself from the bullies and from the alien world of city life. They comforted me when I had no friends. As I got older, I kept creating stories, writing them down in notebooks or on the back of school papers, illustrated with diagrams and maps. Some were familiar, real places. Others were worlds of magic or science fiction. They lived by the same principles--cause and effect, narrative

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structure, character growth, the balance between plot and color.

They were something I did. And then something I just had to keep doing. And then, eventually, something I could do for a living.

Let's be honest, I'm writing these notes on the back of a tax form. I don't have a lot of answers. I do have some material, though. Let me see what's around here ... on my chair is my grandfather's old wool coat, with a ratty sleeve cut by a bramble along the trail to that little river out in the woods. The light on the paper comes from a lamp with a base that's a plaster statue of a creepy Italianate baby. Around its neck is a bracelet from a girl in Chicago whom I've always been a little bit in love with. My work here is to fix these pieces of socio-subjectivity to a storable form, taking them from the air around our collective definitions and putting them into discrete parcels. This is the same activity I have been doing since I first found that river. And sometimes it's hard to tell fact from fiction, you know how that goes, late at night, getting sentimental, ahem, but it's all true, you see. The pond is still there, swollen with oozing green.

The leaves fall on the mountains of ancient trash. It wasn't a dream at all. It just seems like a tall tale because the light is dim ...

The theatre air is dead. I press my lips around the plastic trumpet and hope that it does not make the heinous farting sound. These kids depend on me, their friends and family watch from their seats. I'm going to make a bunch of troubled youth cry if I get this wrong. My director and the whole cast and crew wait for me to play the note, the song of the dying gazelle. I blow.

My horn sings out a beautiful moan as Mother falls to the cool floor and passes away. Baby Gazelle looks out at the crowd and bows her head. The lights fade in time to my crunch crunch of yogurt cups on gravel. The herd gallops. Baby joins them, weeping but strong in her new understanding of the world. I cue the music, the lights come back up, and the kids take their bows. I pack my things into a cardboard box and put them into my Hyundai and drive back along the midnight freeway with the windows down. A week later, I leave town in the early morning and head north to Canada and then across the

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mountains and the plains and back down to the States again until I am here sitting at this metal table with a tax form and a creepy lamp.

Baby Gazelle will never realize her own part in my story. I've never spoken to her. She doesn't know who I am. But that scene on-stage was a culmination of everything I was doing back in the forest. My work, as far as I know, has not saved anyone's life or turned back a flood or earthquake. But sometimes it has helped to make the world more understandable to me. And maybe to you. It all starts by saying yes more than saying no.

I've never told anybody these things before. But now that you're here, well, maybe. I could talk about how the stories you tell never leave you. About apples and tractors, about the old ice-cream stand, about racist chants on the school bus, about pieces of wood with rusty nails, about pine cones that look like zeppelins, about how to survive L.A. traffic by wearing a cowboy hat, about how to beat a blizzard chasing you across the mountains, about alternating short sentences with long ones, about that third plank of reality.

But most of all, I could tell you about a forgotten river called the Nickel Vly. And how, in this line of work, wherever you fly, it goes with you. Whether your luggage ever makes it there or not.