

How Doris Lessing Came to Have Blood on Her Shoes

He answers the phone. It's Doris Lessing and she doesn't want the ants to die.

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He diddled out his bird-watching column every three weeks and cranked out his thousand words for the grocery store rag once a month. He wrote, it was true. But he was not a writer. He knows that just as well as he knows vanilla pudding goes with just about anything or that twelve times an hour, five minutes go by.

He's moved, though, accompanied his wife to another state, to yet another mid-western university, where she makes the big bucks. And since the tuition is free, and the MFA program looks cool, and he's always wanted to do it, he applies. And he gets in. And they give him a part-time job to boot. It's a perfect fit. Most Bible verses fit on a T-shirt, right?

The view from his campus office on the fifth floor reinforces his identity. Painted cement blocks create the walls. The window beside his dark green steel desk looks over a commons. The window is a rectangle. A busyness filters through the slender upper reaches of a sweetgum tree. He has yet to see the leaves, has yet to look out through the limbs during anything other than the cold, icy winter. It's warming, though, and the window is open for the first time. A steady machine noise floats over a man whistling, a garbage truck idling, a door slamming. The cars passing beyond the commons glide silent like toys. The branches wave slightly, slow tight circles that remind him of gym class exercises. He extends his arms and does a few. He used to write poetry but now he doesn't. Poetry is a hole with a pair of pants sewn around it.

The first story he writes is sensational, according to his workshop instructor. The other students nod in agreement. To be honest, though, he finds their works disappointing. He produces his first story through a heat of late-night bourbon, like ripping a scab from a major artery, like a snake zipping across hot asphalt. The phone in the center of the sun's nuclear oven begins to ring.

His wife's new position as Director Of Alumni Affairs excites her, he thinks, but a budget crunch drains the operating fund barely a month into the semester. She spends her time begging for money from alumni to fulfill her job description and then begs for money from the university to enable her to beg from the alumni. She's depressed, he thinks. The waddling yellow parrot seemed distracted by the eclipse. The oldest daughter, in second grade, regresses. Her spelling becomes careless. She shares a workbook during math with a disruptive girl who has weeping sores behind both ears. The youngest daughter is in kindergarten, and she laments each day the bullying of a twin. She is learning to count with candy.

The failed bookstore leaves him with a debt of over \$60,000. Prior to that is graduate school, three years worth at some \$80,000. Without revenue from the bookstore, the credit card payments break his spirit, but he never mentions it. His wife knew this would happen and requires that he follow this directive: "Promise you will not do that again." This makes him angry and he writes a powerful short story in response, which he desperately wants her to read. But she is consumed with the lack of funding at work and wants only for him to listen as she unfolds the day's drama, another unbelievable academic melodrama.

His second story wows the instructor. Some of the students like it but complain that it's inaccessible. They feel they are missing something. His instructor notes that he has the right to be inaccessible. This casts a shadow over the group. He imagines a child drawing a bird in China.

As a graduate assistant, he consolidates an email list and puts out a call for submissions for the new literary journal. The journal is called *Empty*, his suggestion. Not everyone likes the name but they can think of nothing to rival *Empty*. Just the sound of it. A kind of weight that drops on your foot like a pineapple.

Today a woman emails and expresses interest in the creative writing program. To become a writer is what she dreams. She asks if she can drop by that very afternoon, and why not? When she taps on the door with tan knuckles, he is busy plotting the story of an unknown writer who receives the Nobel for a book of non-sequiturs. The story's narrator is fully omniscient and

dallies in the narrative, using non-sequiturs to poke fun at the reader. They disagree on this last point.

While she knocks, his fingers hover over the keys. He stares out the bare window through the budding cottonwood. She is yellow blond, on the heels of 50, and likes the taste of men. Her peace symbol earrings and tie-dye muscle shirt with jeans seem dramatic, especially when she tears off her leather jacket, revealing soft brown puffy shoulders. Her face is sad and long and accustomed to examining failure, but not with a critical eye. She speaks faster than she can think and resorts to stammering for balance. Someone in Tucson once admired a story she wrote. She can probably find it. She thinks writers are interesting. She lives in a co-ed dorm on campus and loves it. Her roller derby name is Peaches.

He encourages her to apply. He wonders aloud, Is there a white heat within that burns to write? Does your need to write seem irrational to others? Will you forfeit sanity, family, friends? Yes. Yes. Yes. She will. In fact, she changed her major last semester from social work to English, the technical writing track. She sings at banquets for a small fee. Once again he encourages her to apply. And Yes he will read a story of hers once she finds it and manages to give it some sense. Will she read one of his? Of course she will. The last train to London will be crowded. She laughs.

The character's name is Garamond. Garamond's last name escapes him. It's the perfect accompaniment to Garamond. It isn't Jurska or Tammany. Spearbuckle. Fir. Pop. Anxious, no. He remembers a P and an X. He thinks. He looks out through the branches of what is now a black maple. Patuxent? No, that's a river, and he inserts Patchouli as a temporary measure. He makes a note to himself. At home he will sit in the green rocking chair by the glass door and the name will come to him. He prepares to leave. It's 2:45 and it will be at least six hours before he's able to continue writing. Garamond Patchouli. This feels like a Gypsy name.

He walks down the stuffy stairwell to the basement and exits the brick building into a crisp, sunny afternoon. Is the brain a single yellow wire?

Muddling along with Patchouli, there are many things he thinks unsatisfactory of Garamond. But the story is more or less self-contained. A self-similarity that seems vaguely

familiar. Garamond, a graduate student pursuing his creative writing degree at a small college, is bored with fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. Everything he writes thrills his instructors until he is sick of it. His classmates have given him up and his young wife refuses to read his stories because they have become violent puzzles. She refuses his offer of a scarification ceremony on their first wedding anniversary. He feels that branding themselves with hot irons serves as a kind of simulacrumous verisimilitude for marriage. He poses it to her as a romantic notion. It's like cannibalism he says, trying to be clear. The *New Yorker* accepts his story "The Railroad Spike" but then retracts the offer.

And to spite them all he retreats into a kind of wooly blackness. The linked words give to his pluck easily, much as a horn hair from a dying mole [P: "Bid on Horn Hair Now" Ebay ad]. For his workshops he turns in stories from high school and even a piece regarding urine (the protagonist is a stream of urine) from fifth grade. He sulks in class. For eighteen months he behaves in this manner, earning the hearts of his teachers and the gall of his classmates. He takes to wearing bunny ears. He keeps a thermometer in his mouth during class. His goal is to complete his book of non-sequiturs and then commit suicide. Prior to the act he plans to mail a single copy to the most obscure literary journal he can think of.

A problem arises when he completes the manuscript, 14,152 words. The first line is this: Death is hard, candy. He lingers over the manuscript, reading it over and over, but never striking or moving a single word. He can't decide which journal is the least of them all. There seem to be so many. It should be a community college he thinks. No. He searches among high school journals.

But then he notices a small monthly paper, a tabloid with awful spelling and ads for holistic healing and living foods. The paper is available at the fish place by the interstate. The most recent issue has a Bible quiz on the front page. This is the perfect venue to debut his final work.

He remembers the ants. For several days his wife asks about the ants. In the finished basement, a long straight line of tiny black ants determine to reach a point B beneath the futon. There seems always to be a crumb or a shiny pink something the ants pilgrimage to from a vast

colony at point A. Cough drops prevent cough drops. Will you call them today? she asks, standing over him as the screen on his laptop dims. Yes, he will call them. Today he will call them. He forgets on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday and today is Thursday and he feels positive he will call.

While the youngest draws a unicorn with a magic marker (the unicorn is holding a magic marker) on a long sheet of art paper, he finds the phone book and looks through the pest control listings. He possesses knowledge of the industry, how they cheat consumers, thinning pesticides with water, and how they poison homes, spraying discards from the recently closed Army depot that leaks mustard gas. Not every book on two stepping has a barcode [P: fix this in manuscript].

So he settles on a nationally branded organization, feeling big names have more to lose, and wisely inquires about a new customer discount, something he knows from his grandfather, and there you have it, they'll be out tomorrow between 4 and 6 to perform the initial inspection and treatment. So he's called about the ants, will drop his youngest at the school at noon, and his mind wanders to the interior of Poe's casket.

Garamond. Garamond Patchouli gathers buckets of sentences and strings them into paragraphs. He divides the 14,151 words (he deletes an 'and') into 165 paragraphs taking up 1,081 lines across 54 double-spaced pages. These paragraphs are divided into 13 chapters. The last paragraph is this:

Sauercat. Adit, a letter, the Hebrew, number 23. Paper tray is empty. Cardiovascular intensive care, brown shag carpet. Jesus's mittens ruined. Info desk, a box of biscuits. Especially hard were her bones, which sang much as Samson's pillars. For emphasis, Tonya outlined her scarlet letter with feces. Dressed to kill, Rodney killed Amy, who, as luck would have it, was dressed to die. Stanch it mister. Train howls in the basement. "Help me! My head is being ripped from my body.....—rrrrrrriiiipp!": "Aaaaahhh!!" !=0.25.

He allows a particular faculty member to read a portion of the manuscript, which he refers to as *God's Eraser*. Now he calls it *knob*, with a little K. But as he receives the Nobel Prize, after making a joke at the expense of King Carl Gustav, he announces mid-speech that his "masterpiece" is now and forever more to be known as *What Every Young Man Should Know*.

As usual with such proceedings, very few in the audience have read this *knob* and what is it called now? The valet assigned to him throughout his stay in Oslo has read the book but certainly the King has not and there are elbows going this way and that in the crowd. “Have you read this?” and just when everyone has had enough, he launches into a reading of Chapter Two, which goes like this:

The numbers just kept getting longer. The colostomy tissue was wet, crimson, and puckered like an everted anus. The marijuana cookie was too sweet and hurt her teeth. At the freak show, the Fat Lady was embarrassed to see a spectator larger than she. [GP: fix this in manuscript]

He then stops short, produces kind words for his mentor Satan, insults the King once more (How do you make the King of Sweden scream twice?), pulls a pointy saber from his pant leg, steps from the podium, cries Empty!, falls on the blade, taking it cleanly through his abdomen, out his back, and, as he had hoped, straight through the black linen jacket. The first thought of the astonished crowd is to look away. The second thought is to find a copy of the book. He stands, staggers, falls backward, and splatters blood all over Doris Lessing’s shoes, who has introduced him.

Doris shakes her head, completely unsatisfied with the way the whole thing is coming off. She resumes her own story, a heartbreaking tale of the fictional wife of Boxcar Willie, Rexella, who gives birth to the love child of the pan flute master Gheorghe Zamfir. Rexella is a problematic character for Doris who is known for the strength of her female protagonists such as the ballsy sunbather in “A Woman on a Roof.” But Rexella isn’t cutting the mustard somehow. And now Garamond seems unhappy. He explains that he, the writer, has taken his crochet hook and made a nasty knot. He prefers to go on writing nonsequiturs and is calling the next volume *Paste*, with a big P. *Paste* will follow *What Every Young Man Should Know* (he did like that bit).

He gazes out through the open window, through the branches, across the commons. The breeze is cool. The ants are taken care of, at least his part in the matter. He will be there tomorrow when the bug man with a red patch on his white shirt parks his white pickup truck in the driveway, or will it be on the street? The phone rings.

Best American Short Stories nominee Russell Helms has had stories in *Sand*, *GFT Press*, *Temenos*, *Drunken Boat*, *Litro*, *Versal*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Moth*, and many other journals. He writes, designs books, and holds a lectureship in English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. His novel *The Ground Catches Everything* (2015) is from *Roundfire Books*. Another novel, *Famine*, is forthcoming from *Knut House Press* (2017).