



Summer Words,
2000

Robert Nichols

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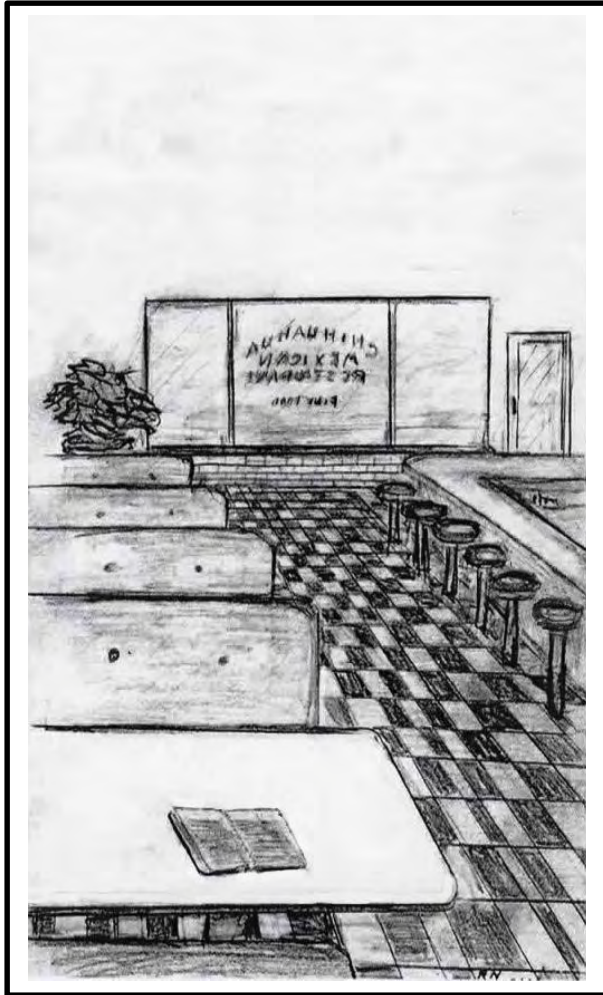
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... various venues of cholesterol and coffee.

The Summer Writing Project, 2000

I've been a writer since I was fifteen. For over forty years now I've been confronting the frustration of blank pages, and, more recently, blank screens. Each new day is an endeavor to channel the immense momentum of art into comprehensible modes of expression. While dwelling on the outer edge of the collective consciousness and, conversely, at the inner core of the individual, I seek words to give extroverted essence to the introverted soul.

Whew! No wonder it's so hard to be a writer.

I know. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? There are times the most difficult challenge to being a writer, a painter, a musician, or any other kind of fool given to the Muses is to avoid spending your whole life just laughing your ass off at yourself.

One day last winter as I was riding the metaphor of a city bus heading downtown, pondering stops along the circuitous route of existence, those who catch the ride, those who arrive late, the inner workings of the individual aboard the prescribed path of the masses, etc., it occurred to me it was really fortunate the fellow up in front had, decided to be a bus driver instead of a poet. Otherwise, it could have been a long walk to town.

The paradox: if you aren't committed to yourself and your art, you'll never create anything; if you do take yourself and your art seriously, you're some kind of egocentric wacko. The only clear way out of the snare of self-esteem versus conceit is to escape the self and dedicate your art to humanity. It sounds noble, and, believe me, it is. But the depth of such a commitment can be stifling to the artist. See what I mean? Some days it's really hard to get started.

My most recent approach to the daily increment of writer's block was an agreement I made with myself to write a 200-word piece each day throughout the summer. I got the idea from my artist friend (and nephew) Eddie Thomas, who broke out of a stalemated phase of his creativity by forcing himself to paint one hundred paintings in a matter of a few months. To do so, he had to put aside the grander notions of the purpose of his art and just furiously let the paint flow. The result was wonderful. He met the self-imposed deadline of his 37th birthday with a waist-high stack of art exploded upon white-primed masonite boards. When he spread them out on the backyard lawn for me to see from an upstairs balcony, they formed a vast quilt of color and form. And when I walked through them, they were a chorus of hue and brush stroke singing the many songs of a single soul. As I wandered up and down the rows of fine images, abstract designs, and whimsical dashes relating themes of wit and devotion and the subtle madness that drives all art, I laughed and I wept and, most of all, I celebrated.

Though he has slowed down to a more reasonable pace, he hasn't stopped painting since.

Two hundred words is nothing to a writer, but *no words* is death to a writer.

I did most of the original writings for this book while eating breakfasts at various fine venues of cholesterol and coffee, primarily in the Denver area. It was possible to write each day knowing that if all else failed, I could simply knock off 200 words describing the world about me, the taste of bacon, or the fit of the waitress' blue jeans. Fortunately, once the mantle of profundity was put aside, I knew no dearth of topics through which to vent my art.

Enjoy my *Summer Words*, they were written for you.

Robert Nichols
October, 2000

Great Britain: The North

It began with a two-day round of subways and darting mini-cars and strolls through Hyde Park and along the Thames and up narrow streets and alleyways stained dark by time. And everywhere there was a sense of the futile, tragic, yet somehow heartening depths of a thousand-year history of hangings, torture, and royal intrigue—all superimposed upon the lives of countless generations of common people just merrily flinging chamber pots out their windows to sparkle the morning with uriniferous dew. There's no place like London.

And then, in a high speed, roller skate of a road-darting rental car, we escaped to the north on highways labeled just so: The North. Six-laned, 70 mile per hour, really serious highways giving way to two-laned, 60 mile per hour "A" roads delving deeper into rural countryside and through villages and along pastureland encompassed by a glow of green like no other I have seen in all my travels. And the journey got even better as we traveled farther north to the hills and meadows and mountains and seacoast, past medieval stone houses clustered at the base of ruined castles, by farms older than corn, and on into Scottish towns where street-corner guys in kilts chanted centuries of struggle and pride through the splay of bagpipes... a tipsy Highlander's invitation to tip a few... a lady in a craft shop laughing with the whole world from her lifelong home at the tip of the Isle of Skye... and the roads became narrower and slower until they were only one lane wide with pull-offs to allow two-way traffic.

My wife Carol nearly slipped off the wet rocks beneath Duntulm Castle to be washed away by the frigid sea. Such a fantastic display of scampering feet and flinging arms and how daughter Kristin and I laughed. "Who says the old gal can't still climb a rock!" I shouted.

Time will sort this saturation of vision and impression. In the meantime, last night, the first night back home from Great Britain, I dreamt from the left lane of the highway.

May 27, 2000

Denver, Colorado

Chihuahua Mexican Restaurant / 7:50 a.m.



Wealth

An old lady slowly makes her way around the perimeter of the parking lot sorting litter and salvaging the treasure of aluminum cans. She puts them in a large plastic trash bag and moves on up the street to the lot next door.

I am a poet and I have little money—less, in fact than the great majority of people of my age, education, and experience dwelling in the economy of the United States today. I really don't particularly like money. It seems, in my case, that it takes more time to accumulate than it's worth. But, then, my poverty is a self-inflicted blessing, and well protected from desperate need by the safety net of loved ones who would hardly allow me to go hungry or be without shelter. I get by and usually carry my share. This past year, I let the poetry go dormant for nine months and worked as a carpenter. I'm stronger and leaner and not quite out of hundreds yet. Almost, but not quite. I still can afford to eat high-cholesterol breakfasts at Mexican restaurants, then spend hours writing in coffee houses where everything costs two dollars.

There was a time, up in the mountains, when I lived with sparse resource and little promise of help. A time when warmth came from twigs foraged from the forest floor and cash came from diverse day jobs consuming precious poetic hours that I might buy bread and cold cuts and just break even. But I didn't mind. A dozen years ago I quit a thirty-thousand-dollar-a-year job to enjoy such austere liberation.

I know nothing of the experience of the broken-down old lady with the Hefty bag ever so slowly filling with aluminum cans.

With the change and loose bills in the pocket of my jeans I could give this maven of the dumpsters more money than she'll make in a week of scavenging. But I can't.

There are many layers coexistent within the Earth's illusion of a three-dimensional reality. I can see her labored step, her tattered clothing. I can see the filth of trash and rubble and weeds through which she walks. I could step outside and feel the same sun that bakes upon her bent back, but, even so, there is no connection between the world of my pocket and the world of her purse. We dwell in different realms and between us there is a border I dare not breach. Poverty, pride, penitence—who could know what forces come to bear upon this summer's morning of the old lady: Karma? Bad luck? Bad living? Who can say *bad*? Bag lady or Bodhisattva? I'll never know.

I cannot give her my wealth, but, with silent will, I wish her well.

June 14, 2000

Denver, Colorado

Chihuahua Mexican Restaurant / 8:45 a.m.

Six Flags over Wilderness

Friday frantic and rushing for the highlands, urban mobs harken to the call of the weekend.

Trailer loads of equipment all gaudy and ready to rev—the buzzing dirt bikes and all-terrain terrors of the trail, the mobile mansions—how they snake in canyon-curving lines and mountain-pass parades behind massive sport utility vehicles up and over the verdant sentinels of the Front Range and into the promised land of the wilds.

Forgive my cynicism, the Earth is home to us all and who am I to damn this desperate dash from the city? It's just that my years of living in these hills taught me that nature at its best is a subtle place of whispered truths and raging silences. Nature is more than thrilling. It is profoundly disquieting and resonantly instructive. Nature's powers change your life. They are not to be trifled with. To know these wilds, you must respect them with your fear and crave them with your heart. You don't merely visit the domain of vast forests, cascading waters, and immense mountains—you neither visit nor intrude: you join. It's intimate when it's real.

I get a kick out of the toys, too. The motorcycles and speedboats and all. I'm not that different from most of these folks who, in complex rites of recreation, besiege the back roads and rivers and peaks of this magnificent land. I realize it isn't so much a matter of what we do as individuals, as how many of us are doing it.

At some point, however, for the sake of the fragile beauty of nature and for any of us to realize its deepest significance, we must admit Six Flags and Waterworld and Disneyland are not urban simulations of nature. Quite the opposite is true. It is the exhilaration and adrenalin rush of an amusement park that we seek as we tear through the tundra on two wheels and scatter the grace of fowl and wildland beast with the scream of our engines.

Perhaps, for most of these weekend adventurers, a season pass for the whole family down at the local mega-carnival would be a better investment than another trailer load of assault vehicles.

For nature, we must show up with a canteen of water and some quiet shoes.

July 21, 2000

Bailey, Colorado

Sully's Restaurant / 7:50 a.m.