

For Whom the Writing Goes

by Damon Guinn

It's 1:30 p.m. on the first day of a writing retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and Educational Center in Piggott, Arkansas, and I'm camped out in a bathroom between the museum/house and gift shop. I'm supposed to be working on "my art," but the gastric remains of junk food, coffee, and energy drinks—fuel from a two-day road trip—have just erupted in my lower GI.

Earlier, seven attendees and I kicked off the retreat with introductions and an overview from the instructor and writer-in-residence, Mary Miller. Miller, a storyteller whose prose chronicles the tension and tedium of everyday life, has published two novels, two collections of short stories, and several pieces of flash fiction. She's shrewd with a sharp wit, and after reading her story collection, *Big World*, I was convinced that she would have something to teach me.

Arkansas State University Heritage Sites has been hosting the retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum annually since 2002. Every year, the visiting author signs a quilt square that is framed and placed on a wall in the Educational Center. The earliest square is from July 7, 2002. It's signed by author Lorian Hemingway, the daughter of Gregory Hemingway, Ernest's youngest son with Pauline. Both she and her father—who later identified as Gloria and underwent gender reassignment surgery—each have fascinating stories all their own.

Following our morning discussion and an awkward lunch, we are given an hour and a half of independent writing time. The director, Shannon Williams, tells us that we are free to write wherever we like—at the Educational Center, in the Pfeiffer house, or at the studio above the barn where Hemingway did most of his work while visiting. I decide to follow Dr. Adam Long, who is

the executive director of Arkansas State University's Heritage Sites, and a sixty-something man named Bill from Kentucky.

Adam leads us to the house and gives us a cursory tour of the rooms, pointing out choice spots. I pick an open room on the second floor with conference chairs arranged around the perimeter.

Adam explains that there probably won't be any tours, but if people do come through, I can just close the door and continue working. That will be interesting, I think, imagining myself springing to my feet and slamming the door on a family who planned months in advance to visit this historic home once graced by Hemingway. He adds that he will lock the front door to the house because it tends to blow open. Then he and Bill head off to see the rest of the house.

I start working on a story about rivalry between childhood friends, something I've been playing around with for years, but I'm too unsettled to focus.

Before traveling to Piggott, I watched Ken Burns' PBS documentary on Hemingway, so I'm curious to explore the house and see remnants of the writer's experience in Arkansas. As I wander from room to room looking at the memorabilia, the downstairs door opens and closes. I hear shuffling and banging. Bill must have returned, and it sounds like he's burglarizing the place. I want to investigate, but my gut starts to rumble, and I'm forced to bolt down the stairs of the museum three at a time and make a clenched-cheeked beeline for the bathroom.

My first day and I already can't stomach it.

Fathers and Sons (with a Mother in the Mix)

My trip to Piggott had taken a surprise turn when my traveling companion, my eleven-year-

old son Oliver, and I arrived at the midway point of our drive. I had reserved a teepee on Airbnb for a stop in Kansas City, Hemingway's old stomping grounds, on the way to my parents' place in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Oliver was going to hang out with his grandparents and cousins while I attended the retreat.

At the first sight of the teepee, Oliver was thoroughly nonplussed. "Do we have to stay *there* tonight," he whined. He wanted AC and TV, not BS. He wanted to be back home playing *Fortnite* or *Minecraft* on his PC, not hanging out in a teepee with faux-Native American décor, listening to his old man snore.

"It'll be an adventure!" I enthused.

"Yeah, right," was his dejected reply.

Situated off a deteriorating highway flanked by abandoned storefronts, our teepee was tucked in the backyard of a modest suburban home and right next to a murky pond that belched with bull frogs. I went to "test" the outhouse and told Oliver we would have the distinct privilege of pooping in a sawdust-filled five-gallon bucket. He dropped his head in defeat and sulked to the teepee.

It was muggy outside, and Oliver complained that he felt sticky and gross, so he stripped off his shirt and settled in to watch *YouTube* videos on his phone. That's when the bull frogs kicked up their croaks a notch and started doing call-and-response with a chorus of crickets.

"How am I supposed to sleep tonight with all this noise?!" Oliver demanded, storming over to a chair and announcing that he would be listening to Yo-Yo Ma until he fell asleep.

"Good call," I replied, returning to my place in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. A short chapter later, I glanced over my shoulder to see Oliver soundly sleeping while the frogs and crickets competed for swamp cred.

The teepee was illuminated inside by solar-powered patio lights that were brighter than a single table lamp but dim enough to be ignored by heavy sleepers. Oliver always slept with a lamp on; I customarily slept in darkness that rivaled Vantablack. By 2:00 a.m., Oliver's phone was

dead, and I was wide awake. Oliver started to toss and turn while I thought through the logistics of Plan B. I would simply book a hotel the next day, and we could spend the afternoon in Kansas City with friends before driving to Jonesboro on Sunday.

Plan B changed to Plan C the moment Oliver woke up.

Bolting upright, he screamed, "I can't sleep!" before springing to his feet and frantically pacing back and forth in the teepee.

"Do you want to pack up and drive to Jonesboro?" I asked him, hoping he would say no to the six-and-a-half-hour overnight drive.

"Oh, Dada, I know!" he beamed. "We can get some gum and energy drinks and listen to loud music to stay awake! You can get a coffee *and* an energy drink, so you'll have a back-up after you finish the first."

We were back on the highway in less than 15 minutes. At 2:30 in the morning.

By the time we made it to Jonesboro, the car, my son, and I were all cruising on fumes. Oliver slept soundly for hours after our arrival, while I struggled to catch any rest whatsoever.

My eyes eventually dimmed as I reread lines from Hemingway's story, "Fathers and Sons":

Like all men with a faculty that surpasses human requirements, his father was very nervous. Then, too, he was sentimental, and, like most sentimental people, he was both cruel and abused. Also, he had much bad luck, and it was not all of it his own.

I, too, had been cursed with much bad luck, bad luck that had left me feeling suicidal at times. Fortunately, I had a loving son to accompany me on my journey.

When Monday morning rolled around, I packed the car for the short drive northeast from Jonesboro to Piggott. I'm nearly fifty, but my mom nevertheless insisted on loading me up with a pantry's worth of snacks before taking my picture in front of the car. I felt like an overgrown kid heading to summer camp.

The drive through rural Arkansas, through towns named Marmaduke and Rector, made me

lonely—the flat farmland and small, sometimes desolate, towns reminded me of how empty and quiet our country can be, so far removed from the cacophony and occasional chaos of cities like my current place of residence, Minneapolis.

I decided to attend the retreat based on my favorable impression of Miller's writing and my mom's recommendation. My mom has been attending the retreat for years, reading occasional poems about the childhood exploits of my brothers and me . . . like setting fire to the kudzu in the ravine behind our old home, "running away from home" to a fort in said ravine, and stealing money from an envelope reserved for church tithing.

Recalling her descriptions of past retreats, I had serious doubts about attending. I envisioned a writing group at a retirement home—a bunch of old biddies and geezers sharing stories about their grandkids and sciatica. I had never attended a writing retreat, and I didn't relish the idea of having my writing critiqued by a group of geriatric strangers. And, honestly, I'm not even a big Hemingway fan; I enjoy his writing, but I wasn't convinced it was worth the thirteen-hour drive to visit the place he occasionally visited while writing *A Farewell to Arms*.

Despite all of that, my mom somehow convinced me that I would benefit from the collegial atmosphere and discussions about craft. Plus, it was a good excuse to visit my parents and try something different after a grueling year of COVID quarantine. That and I was unemployed after a year and a half of job rejections.

When I finally pulled into the drive of the Pfeiffer home, I took a moment to sit in my car and examine the large but plain Victorian façade. It wasn't as stately as I anticipated. It didn't look grandiose enough to temporarily house Hemingway's larger-than-life persona or the fortunes of his in-laws' pharmaceutical empire, even as it dwarfed the '70s-style brick rambler that served as the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Educational Center, where our writing classes would be held.

As I entered the center and angled my way toward a seat, an older woman at the conference

table blurted out, "I bet I know who you are! You're Fay's son." She introduced herself as Charlotte. Another woman in the room chimed in, "Oh, yeah. Fay with no E. She's a regular." That was Talya, the only published novelist in the group besides the instructor.

Oh, great, I thought. Every expletive and lurid phrase I read aloud is going to find its way back to my mom.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

We kick off the first class with a great conversation about the humor and wisdom of Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, a book all novice writers are encouraged to read, and then dive into a reading of Joe Brainard's *I Remember*. Miller, our instructor, reading the crowd, skims over Brainard's more titillating memories about his sexual experiences.

We break for independent writing time after lunch. That's when I wind up alone in the Pfeiffer house. Returning to the Educational Center, Karen, an assistant with ASU Heritage Sites, announces to the room, in what could easily be confused as a conspiratorial tone, that I selected Max's room. Max was the Pfeiffer's fourth child who died from the 1918 flu epidemic at age eleven. I had chosen the dead kid's room, who died from the flu no less!

Once the entire group reconvenes, two attendees volunteer to share what they wrote during the break. Tonia, a retired attorney from Little Rock, details her discovery that the man she adored as her maternal grandfather wasn't her real grandfather. Next, Bill, whose occupation escapes me, launches into a sprawling, borderline-metaphysical account of his life and the universe. We're dumbfounded. It's a prolix soliloquy that sounds like free verse. (The next day, Bill transforms the first chapter of prose into a poem per the group's recommendation, and we all agree that it's much better.)

With that, we're dismissed for the day, and I jump in my car and make a run for the Missouri border. Piggott is in a dry county, and I need booze to help me sleep and process my first

strange day at the retreat.

Back in my room at the Inn at Piggott, I pour myself some scotch, fire up *Spotify* for background music, and set to work on a story. But again, I'm too distracted and it's only the first day, so I step outside my room to inventory the inn's lounge and dining room. As I do, the door clicks shut, and I immediately realize I'm locked out. *Shit!* My cell phone is in the room, and there's no phone in the lobby. I ring the front bell, but no one responds, so I head back to the second floor and nervously knock on the guest's door across from mine. No answer. I cross the hall and knock on another door.

"Is someone out there?" a woman yells. She peeks through the curtain in the door's window, and I recognize Charlotte's face. "Who is that!?"

"It's Damon, Charlotte. I'm sorry to bother you, but I've locked myself out of my room, and I need to call someone to let me in."

"I'm not dressed, Damon," she adds before quickly cracking open the door and thrusting her phone at me.

"I'm very sorry. This should only take a minute," I reassure her.

"It's okay," she tells me. "I'm your mother's friend."

Sleep comes easier that evening with the help of scotch. Like the old man who stays too late drinking at a café in Hemingway's story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," I feel like the loneliest man in the world, the drink in hand my only companion. But I am settling in. I don't even mind the rumble of trains outside the inn.

A Way You'll Never Be

We open the conversation on the second day with a discussion about Jo Ann Beard's essay "Now," which I love for the vivid description of Alaska, the author's channeling of her father's World War II experience, and references to Neil Young and Denis Johnson. There is dissent over the essay's value. Some of us like the imagery and the free-form style; others are frustrated by the lack of structure and focus.

We learn that the piece was originally a

speech Beard presented and later printed in *AGNI* magazine. Beth, a writing instructor at the University of Tennessee-Martin, is not cool with this. "Do you think we could get away with something like that?"

Mary adds that Beard wrote a celebrated essay for *The New Yorker* called "The Fourth State of Matter" about a mass shooting at the University of Iowa that won her a loyal audience. Mary promises to hunt it down.

Next up is Cheever's story, *Reunion*. This one is about an estranged father and son on a day-drinking excursion. It promptly brings out the psychoanalysts among us. Bill, for the first of what will be many times to follow, opens the Pandora's Box of his personal life and shares an account of his time in a psychiatric hospital. As he veers farther off topic and into the murkier recesses of his mind, the rest of us, intrigued and unnerved, collectively pull back a little from the table, acknowledging that a boundary has been crossed.

Charlotte, a former school librarian, soon mollifies us with a piece about her childhood in the '50s. Then Beth shares a story about meeting William Stafford during her stint as a graduate student, recalling how she smugly treated the anthologized poet. Her story is full of subtle references to Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark." The references are lost on our group. It's been more than twenty years since I've read the poem, and the others haven't read it at all. But it's a clever story, and a beautiful reminder to wake up every morning and get to work on what you love.

That evening after dinner, I grab some scotch, my portable speaker, and a copy of Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter" and head to the rear deck of the inn to read and scribble some thoughts. The sun sets in time with Yo-Yo Ma's cello. The deck shakes as a train blows by in the background. Birds dart by, surfing the breeze and skirting past a waxing gibbous moon that has just begun to peak around the corner of the inn's roof. A text from my wife says she'll call soon. The phone remains silent.

I look across the town from the balcony. It must have been a much different place in Hemingway's day. I gulp down the scotch, savoring the earthy-sweet bloom of heat in my mouth. I know that I will never be the writer I want to be.

Back in my room, I pull up Elia Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd* on my laptop. The movie is Piggott's other major claim to fame. Part of the film is set in the town.

The movie had a resurgence after the 2016 election. Several political commentators noted the similarities between Donald Trump and the film's main character, Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes. Lonesome is a drifter who uses his good-ole-boy schtick to rise to celebrity status on TV before wedging his way into politics. He's even referred to as an "influencer," just like today's tech-savvy promoters. And, like Trump, he embellishes a populist persona to pitch false claims to "real Americans" over the airwaves.

Piggott is smack dab in Trump country. I could walk a few blocks from the main square and spot at least two or three "Trump 2020" banners and even a crudely written "Stop the Steal" yard sign.

The irony isn't lost on me, but, judging by the political placards lingering long past the election, the locals didn't get the memo.

A Day's Wait

On Wednesday morning, Mary is excited to ask us about "The Fourth State of Matter." We dig into Beard's description of the degeneration of her dog, her husband's abandonment of their marriage, and the mass shooting that kills her colleagues in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Iowa. It's a riveting essay with an eloquence that forces us to question our abilities as writers. If it takes a topic as horrific as mass murder to be a noteworthy writer, what hope do we have?

"I guess I can't be a writer, then," Charlotte says. "Nothing that interesting happens to me. My life is too normal."

We take turns offering her hollow words of encouragement, but each of us seems to realize

the reality of the situation. A devastatingly sad essay has left us sadder still.

Fortunately, Karen turns our thoughts and stomachs away from despair. A veteran violist with the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Karen shares a short piece about a subject that is near and dear to our hearts and stomachs: pork. She strings together a comparative history of pork dishes in the Mid-South with their native dishes in Austria, Germany, and France, singing its praises by way of allusions to great composers. It's the perfect transition to lunch.

I head back to the inn for a phone interview for a job in Minneapolis then set about revising my unfinished short story. It's my turn to read my work during the afternoon session, and I'm not relishing the potential criticism.

Back in the classroom, I read the first part of my story, summoning the speed and tone of the story's insecure, adolescent narrator. Even though I emphasize words like "piss" and "dick," the overall response is positive. A couple of the attendees say they can relate to the narrator's plight. Some want to know what happens in the second part since I accidentally include a page and a half of it. I'm reworking the second part, I explain, describing some of the potential plot scenarios.

Talya reads a flash fiction story next. It's about an aging woman inspecting her garden in the morning. I can easily imagine the piece in the "Readings" section of *Harper's* magazine.

Before we break for the day, I invite the group to join me for dinner at the pizza place on the square and note that the deck behind the inn has a great view of the sunset. I'm in need of some company. Tonia and Talya are the only takers.

We are the only customers, too, so we ask the teenage waitress holding down the fort if it's okay to bring our own wine into the restaurant. "I don't know, but I doubt anyone will be here tonight, so I really don't care," she replies nonchalantly before returning a few minutes later with three large Styrofoam cups. Without missing a beat, Tonia hands me the key to her room and

gives me instructions on where to find her box of Franzia. Minutes later, I retrieve it from the mini fridge, two short paces past a three-box tower of cigarette cartons. I also grab a bottle of red from my room and smuggle the stash back to the pizza joint in my book bag.

Tonia, Talya, and I wash down our pizza with glassfuls of contraband, rehashing the day's discussions and basking in the moment.

One Reader Writes

We dive into some flash fiction samples on the following day, starting with George Saunders' story "Sticks." One of my favorite living writers, Saunders captures my attention by creating absurd and surrealistic settings that are navigated by characters struggling with their humanity. "Sticks" is about Saunders' father's tradition of decorating a pole for the holidays.

The story inspires me to search for quotes from Saunders while the group reviews our other samples for the day. Saunders has a reputation for producing quotes like this: "What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly."

I will soon discover that this is the universe, via Saunders, preparing me for the afternoon session.

One o'clock rolls around, and I meet with Mary for my one-on-one review session. I had decided to share the first ten pages of a memoir I began writing during the pandemic because it felt like the most earnest writing I've done to date. The book opens with a recollection of a near-fatal night in December 2020 before shifting to the year I spent in Bulgaria after graduating from college. Mary points out that the sections about Bulgaria come across more naturally than the rest. She encourages me to keep working on the material and share the draft with her once I have two hundred pages.

I leave the review session feeling optimistic about my writing for the first time in as long as I can remember. I've always considered myself

more of a reader than a writer, so the validation gives me a boost.

The confidence doesn't last long. Back in the class, I read a couple of my poems, foolishly following Beth, the real poet in the room. I first read a poem called "Old Man Winter." At the end of the first page, I freeze. I haven't printed the second page. The room is silent. Embarrassed, I quickly print copies of the second page, pass them around the table, and resume my reading. When I finish, I get an obligatory "That's nice" from someone before the others start lobbing questions and comments my way.

"What do you mean by 'latent snow'?" one woman asks.

"I was thinking of the dormant quality of a pending snowstorm," I argue. "You know, when you can feel it coming? The expectancy. The nearness."

"Maybe you should change this to a flash fiction piece," another recommends.

"Yeah, I can see that" is my lame reply.

"Do you really need the adjective 'dusty' to describe the smell of radiator heat or 'musty' for the warmth of an afghan?" the instructor asks.

"Well, younger readers might not have a clue what radiators smell like and might not even know what an afghan is." It was a weak defense, but it makes sense to me.

The next poem I read is about my daughter—her search for knowledge and answers and my fear of losing her too soon to a cruel world. I choke up as I read a stanza about wanting to shield her from pain as she grows increasingly distant. "But you're leaving me at thirteen," I read. "/ Too soon, it seems, / To fully protect you or to fully grieve."

The tears flow without warning. My strained relationship with my daughter has been lingering in the back of my mind for months now, and I'm finally processing it. I apologize and explain it's the first time I've read the poem aloud. The others smile as I finish the piece. My pathetic display is met with positive reception, and for the first time all week, I'm glad to be here.

That evening, after a catfish dinner with the

group, I let myself decompress. In a sense, I've accomplished something I wasn't expecting—I've held out my writing as a mirror image of myself, reflecting deeply seated thoughts and beliefs for others to see, while discovering another vision of who I've become and who I want to be.

The End of Something

Boobs. That's the topic that provides some much-needed levity during Friday's discussion. It's inspired by the reading of Lucille Clifton's poem, "homage to my hips." The attendees wonder if any poets have written about boobs in the same way, prompting Charlotte to search the web. She comes across a book about Asian breasts. I jokingly tell her to proceed with caution. Scrolling down a webpage, she gasps, "Oh, my!" and we all start laughing.

The conversation takes a more serious tone when we discuss the story "Envy" by Kathryn Chetkovich. It's about her relationship with Jonathan Franzen, and her jealousy over his success. She doesn't mention him by name in the story, but everyone looks it up.

It's an appropriate choice for one of our final readings during the retreat. Envy could be considered a central theme of Hemingway's work. His characters envy bullfighters, wild game hunters, other men's women. To an extent, Hemingway envied the writers in Paris who helped him get recognized for fiction: Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Some of those writers ultimately envied him in return—or, at least, Fitzgerald did if Hemingway's own egotistical account in *A Movable Feast* is any indication.

I'm certainly envious of the other writers in the group who appear confident and at ease with their writing, something I had hoped to achieve by attending the retreat.

As the final day progresses, Talya shares a story about the deterioration of her long-vacant high school and the disappearance of time. We take turns sharing memories of our old schools, enchanted by nostalgia.

Karen captures our attention with a travel

ogue about visiting Key West during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. We all want to hear more about the mermaids of Weeki Wachee and Karen's mother's *nucleomitophobia* (a term that's new to all of us). I don't think to ask Karen if she knew about Hemingway when she was a little girl traveling through his former place of residence a year and a half after he blew his brains out in Idaho. And what would the author have made of the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis? Hemingway didn't have much interest in Castro and Guevara or their fight against Batista. He just wanted to fish and drink and salvage his reputation as a writer with *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The reading that most intrigues me is a final poem from Beth called *Trail*. She asks us to consider two possible endings. I opt for the first version but think she should stop short with the lines: "Listen to the bell ring. / It does not have to be / the devil declaring / he's come to call again."

I recognize it as a nod to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," but I don't probe Beth about the allusion, and I gloss over the possible connection to *For Whom the Bells Tolls*. It's only after the retreat that I review the ending of Hemingway's highly regarded novel. The book ends with the main character, Robert Jordan, lying in a forest with a broken leg as he prepares to blow up a bridge to thwart the enemy's advance. Jordan faces a dilemma: He can carry out the mission and wait for the enemy to find him and kill him while his fellow soldiers escape, or he can try to flee with his comrades and possibly live out his days with his lover, Maria. He chooses to stay, the smell of the pine needles on the forest floor flooding him with nostalgia.

The novel reminds us of nature's maxim: All things must come to an end; we are simply part of the cycle. Life can seem futile, but does it remain so if we get to choose how to live it?

I came to the retreat with a sense of dread. I thought I would be bored, that I wouldn't have anything in common with the attendees. I would realize my efforts to write were hopeless, and it would drive me deeper into the depression that

have haunted me for years.

Instead, I left the retreat with a sense of purpose. Impressed with the insight of my fellow writers and their confidence to examine memories both beautiful and hideous. I want that. I

don't want to succumb to despair and cut my life short like Hemingway.

The devil might very well come calling again, but hopefully I'll be too busy writing to pay him any attention. ▲▼▲

Delta Sources and Resources

**The Hemingway-Pfeiffer
Summer Writer's Retreat
Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum and
Educational Center
Piggott, Arkansas**
by Marcus Charles Tribbett



Hemingway-Pfeiffer House.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.

Hosted annually since 2002 (as 2021 attendee Damon Guinn notes in his essay in this issue), the Summer Writer's Retreat at the Hemingway-Pfeiffer Museum in Piggot, Arkansas, has attracted a wealth of talent for decades—both among participants and teachers. Recent past writers-in-residence have included Matt Gallagher, author of two novels and a collection of short fiction; Mary Miller, who has two novels and two short story-collections; Hugh Martin with three book credits; C.D. Albin, journal editor, poet, and short story author; and Pat Carr with sixteen published books.

An interactive experience for aspiring and published writers alike, the retreat strives to be a

place where the craft of writing is sharpened, creativity is strengthened, and camaraderie and friendships are fostered. The teachers have decades of experience among them as creative writing instructors and workshop leaders.

This year's writer-in-residence is Matthew Pitt, Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Texas Christian University. Pitt has worked in television and as an editor, has published two short-story collections, *These Are Our Demands* and *Attention Please Now*, with a third underway and a forthcoming novella, *The Be-Everything Brothers*.

Additional information about the retreat, held this year from June 19th to the 23rd, and a downloadable registration form can be found on the museum's website at hemingway.astate.edu. As the site notes, "participants come from all backgrounds and experience levels." Seize your chance to be mentored and work in a constructive and collaborative atmosphere in a beautiful, historic setting. Registration fee is \$325. ▲▼▲



Inside Hemingway's Barn Studio.
Photo courtesy of Damon Guinn.