

summer 2009

the Southern Review

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY AT LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

\$12.00US \$14.00CAN 9 2>



25274 80498 6

LUCY FERRISS

Writing the Body

WE GATHER ON THURSDAY NIGHTS. The barn housing us is said to be historic. It needs a new coat of paint, caulking for the windows, a roof that won't leak in the spring downpours, and better walls to hold in the wood stove heat with which we try to blast away the winter chill. The room needs to be warm, for the models. Naked, they hold their poses for up to forty minutes. A person can freeze to death in that time.

The only art training I ever received was in ninth grade, where I quickly fell behind the class during the unit on sculpture. The other students were welding metal while I still labored over my sandstone rabbit. By the time we got to charcoal and perspective, I knew my disability in visual art was akin to a dyslexic's in reading. I needed more time than life would give me to learn what a shape was. I needed more of the steps broken down in order to render that shape on the page or in space. Only some alternate route toward learning would ever move me beyond stick figures. No such routes being available, I put the visual stuff away and built my raft of words.

A year ago, however, I found myself at a retreat for writers and artists where figure drawing was offered, free, four mornings a week. Midway through my second week, the words a hopeless tangle, I escaped my studio. I stopped in at the tiny artists' supply shop on the premises. Too embarrassed to ask what I should equip myself with, I bought a sketch pad and a few sticks of charcoal and sneaked out, a spy in the house of art. I headed over to the barn. Inside sat a college kid reading a magazine on a sagging couch. He glanced up. "Someone at last," he said.

"Where are all the artists?" I asked.

"Well, you're here," he said.

The visual artists had gotten bored, or weren't looking for a break from stacking orange juice cans or wiring some road-kill varmint to snap its jaws at the click of a switch. The kid started to undress. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never done this before."

"Usually I start with twenty-second poses. How's that?"

"Sure," I said. "Whatever you usually do."

Even to myself, I sounded suspiciously like a john at his first visit to a house of ill repute. The model was down to his jeans. He glanced over at me. He was a shortish young man, muscled through the chest, with just a whisper of beer belly. "If you get uncomfortable," he said, "I'm going to get uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," I said. This was oddly true. The model was the age of my older son. "I'm just ignorant."

"Okay," he said. He pulled down his jeans and proceeded to stretch, first one way, then the other. Quickly I got out my pad. I made lines—a spine, a hip, a shoulder and arm. The results looked Thurberesque—though Thurber, I recalled as I squinted at my hapless cartoons, had had an excuse: He was almost blind.

"God, these are awful," I said.

"I'm sorry," said the model. "Am I moving too fast? Do you want a profile pose?"

"You're fine," I said.

"Maybe a long pose."

"Sure, that's good."

He settled onto the couch. At first I thought I ought to talk to him. We were the only two people in the barn. In my experience, when a man and a woman are together, one of them unclothed, and they cease talking, they enter a dangerous realm. So I asked this young man what he was majoring in, how long he'd been modeling, which of the artists had sketched him, where his family lived. While he answered, I found my charcoal swirls gradually coming to focus on his leg. He was sitting, now, on the shabby couch, leaning back on a couple of pillows and propped on his arm. I could not imagine transferring his tilted body to the page, or capturing the shadows that crossed his V-shaped torso from the track lights set up in the barn. His body became amazing to me, a symphony of planes, angles, curves, dimples, hair. The leg on which my eyes settled was draped over the other leg, which was bent and tucked up on the couch and had the distinct disadvantage of possessing a foot in clear view. A foot! My god, how had anyone ever reproduced a foot?

I went from the hard charcoal to the soft. I broke a piece and turned it sideways to make shadows. There was the curve, yes, of the quad muscle as it spread over the dingy cushion. There was the tendon pulling on the knee. Gradually, as I made lines and erased them, abandoned one sheet of sketch paper and started another, I realized that we had stopped talking. The model had picked up a book—Faulkner—and was reading. I didn't ask him about the book. I didn't want to know about

the book. I only wanted to get that leg. Or maybe just the thigh. Just as far as the knee. The knee was a bitch. It was beautiful. There. And there. And there.

After forty-five minutes, I had had enough. I could not imagine anything I could do to improve my drawing of the leg. And the rest of the body intimidated me completely. I thanked the model and released him. "Man, this is the easiest gig," he said as he slipped his T-shirt back on.

The rest of that day, I kept pulling out my drawing. I hated it for not being better. I remembered how long that sandstone rabbit took me, how I'd kept sanding away—under the ears, above the haunch—as if the sculpture were not being carved but somehow gestating under my hesitant fingers. Next day, I went back to the barn. This time there was one other artist, a Vietnamese painter who liked to execute wild abstracts in lacquer. She spoke just enough English to tell the college kid, with authority, where to stand, how to tilt his head, what to do with his feet. She worked with fat sticks of charcoal that looked nothing like what I'd found at the store. The figures on her page soon seemed to hold more life than the model himself. There was his pouch of fat, there his pectorals, there his chubby penis, there the straight, narrow sweep of his nose, his vulnerable mouth.

I worked on another version of his leg. For more than an hour. It was better, though not by much. I did not want the Vietnamese painter to see it, and when she smiled at me I cringed at her condescension. Still, the rest of the day, I felt coursing through me the kind of energy I remembered from days playing sports in high school, those few times when I scored a goal. Something had happened. I had made it happen.

The late John Updike, who spent a year at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford, spoke of "the itch to make dark marks on white paper," shared by writers and artists. That itch is no longer satisfied, in our computer age, by the act of writing. The fine muscles that once enabled Charles Dickens to compose dozens of pages by hand at a single sitting (and that may function still, in rare cases like that of J. K. Rowling, whose fans once deluged her with lined paper when she complained of running out) have gone lax and given way to carpal tunnel syndrome. My "writing itch," insofar as it applies to a physical event in real time with real ink on real paper, is meagerly satisfied by my pleasure in the loopy capitals *L* and *F* of my signature.

My first foray into figure drawing, then, may have stemmed from the urge to create, as William Gass put it, "words [that] would not be thought, they would be

made." But figure drawing has appeal far beyond the tactile outlet denied by my computer. Writers down the ages have paid attention to what Gass dubbed "the dual muse." In his enormous compilation *The Writer's Brush*, Donald Friedman has gathered almost two hundred writer-artists, beginning with Johann Goethe and running through Jonathan Lethem. Going back farther in time, no one would be surprised to learn that Plato sketched, or Chaucer. Lao-tzu drew his characters as much as he wrote them.

Returned from my retreat to the ordinary rhythms of life, I have now joined a local figure-drawing circle. We meet once a week in an old barn converted to a community art league. The number of sketchers ranges from a half dozen to twenty. Most are men. A handful make a living teaching art; among the rest are a printer, a jeweler, an insurance salesman, several students, several unemployed. Most work in pencil or charcoal, but some use India ink, pastels, watercolors. Our weekly contributions pay the professional models—some of them artists themselves—who pose for us.

I have gone from fearing the Thursday nights when we gather—Will I keep my focus? Will my drawing be too embarrassing?—to anticipating them with a sort of hunger. My compulsion to return every week, to take up charcoal and try to channel the human form from its living incarnation to the pebbly white of my sketch pad resembles the others', but it partakes also of my needs and compulsions as a writer, and those needs themselves are no doubt unique to each writer who makes the attempt to draw or paint. In my case, I can articulate two distinct allures that the charmed Thursday circle represents for me. The first is an escape from the world of words, the second a return to it.

I tend to arrive at the barn late, after the model has begun her short poses and most of the easels are set up. The others nod and smile at me. If the circle is crowded, they make room. Someone's brought a CD player, and there's folk music in the background. Logs crackle in the wood stove. Otherwise, the only sound is the susurrus of soft charcoal across paper. The model's skin, lit by the track lamps, always startles me. The pearliness of the young, white woman with her dyed black hair. The milk coffee of the young, black woman. The ivory of the older man, and his bluish veins. So much skin. Where there is body hair, so much hair. To set myself up I fetch an easel from the wing of the barn that still contains empty horses' stalls. The model stands with her weight on one leg, arm lifted to the rafter, head thrown back. I get in a few lines, a shadow; then she shifts. She crouches with her back to me, huddled as if in fear. I try for the line of vertebrae, the back of

the head, the curve of a buttock. Now she bends and reaches out, as if grabbing a child back from the edge of a cliff. My arm is moving in circles now, getting the rounded muscle of the shoulder, the loop of skin over the hip, the breast pulled one way by the outstretched arm and the other by gravity. I flip the pages of my drawing pad—I've learned to bring two pads, one for the quick poses, the other for the long pose—and work to keep up, to catch a bit of this body before it morphs. Others are working in miniature, fitting several sketches onto one page, but I cannot draw small.

"I'm taking a break," says the model.

She relaxes. Most of us put down our pencils, our charcoals, our pens. Some continue shading, extending, drawing already from memory. The model shrugs on a robe. Bill, the printer, steps into the kitchen to make coffee. We pull out our ten-dollar donations. We clear our throats. Nancy asks Dave about his trip to New York. Marc asks me how classes are going. Some people actually talk to the model, transformed by the robe into a person like the rest of us; she's tired, she's been modeling all day.

I am reminded of nothing so much as that awkward moment in a Protestant church service when the minister, having urged us from the Book of Common Prayer to confess our sins before Almighty God, clears his throat and asks for announcements. I grew up attending church, my first aesthetic experience. The litanies and formalized movements enthralled me. In many ways the drawing circle reminds me of that rapturous hour. We are all gathered here—young and old, employed and unemployed—in joined worship of the human form. We are all, in our separate ways, trying to make a connection between mortal and immortal. We are all brought up short, as our hands move across our pages, by the fragility of the human condition. Most of all, for me, our communion takes place chiefly in silence, just as that earlier communion took place in chant. I used to be appalled when the robed minister broke character to advertise the bake sale or to instruct us to greet one another and make small talk for a moment before returning to the task of confronting our Maker.

In the drawing circle, as most chat freely during the break, there remain a few—and I find myself increasingly among them—who sit mute on our folding chairs, our eyes fixed on the middle distance. As the model disrobes and returns to her place on the elevated platform, we rise, pick up our tools again, and set to our task.

My appetite for the long pose has increased considerably since the morning when I gave up on a leg at forty-five minutes. Now, in the circle, long poses generally

last two hours, with perhaps three breaks, and at each stage I find myself moving deeper into what I call my drawing mind. Every thought, every movement focuses on one thing: rendering this body, held as it is in this moment of time, onto this sheet of paper. Draw what you see, I tell myself. Not what I think I should see, not the long arm stretching up and back from the shoulder, but what I *see*: a compressed cylinder for the upper arm, a triangle for the lower. Gradually—as the minutes tick by, as someone changes the CD, as someone else stokes the stove—thoughts like, How can I get the shadow of that underarm? or, The sag in that hip breaks my heart—should I try the extra-soft vine for it? melt away. In their place come thoughts that I cannot express in this essay, because they are thoughts in line, in gesture. They are thoughts that lie, like bumps and potholes and smooth places, along the road that travels from this three-dimensional naked body before me, containing its history and its mortality, through my eyes and out to my arms and hand, to the shape that grows from the tool I hold in my fingers—a shape that, whatever its flatness, I believe to be as round and solid as the body at the other end of the road.

In church, nonbeliever that I was, I used to find my thoughts floating back through my week and ahead to plans and anxieties that crowded out the minister's words. Here, the language of drawing crowds out my own words. "Like Buddhist meditation," my friends suggest when I try to explain the feeling. But I am not emptying my mind; I am filling it with what feels like an antidote to a life of words, a necessary corrective. A life of silence, of materials, of the body. By the time the model takes her last break, I realize that I have not had a verbal thought in half an hour. Driving home, as I exit the expressway through an underpass, I read the shadows cast on the pavement by tall streetlamps as swaths of soft charcoal, the world as a figured thing.

Hence the escape. Now to the return. A few weeks ago, in place of one of the regular models, we had Karen posing for us—a member of the figure-drawing circle who, as it turns out, is the one who takes care of hiring the models. That night's model had called in sick; Karen, who's done modeling in the past, was subbing. She did an excellent job, using a minimal set of props—a long scarf, a walking stick—to strike dramatic poses, and the lights cast terrific geometric shadows across her muscular body. She also talked. Not moving her head a centimeter, she cracked jokes with a couple of the guys in the circle, promised them newer models

for next spring, complained about her children. Down the center of her abdomen ran a delicate scar. At one point she commented on something's having happened "before the cancer." Dave asked, "How's that going, Karen?"

"What, you mean the cancer?"

"No, I mean your parenting. Of course I mean the cancer."

"Fine," she said. "I mean, I'm fine. It's in remission. I work out a lot."

My hand wavered over my sketch pad. I didn't want to hear this conversation. I didn't want to know Karen's story—her kids, the cancer. I didn't want to think what that scar meant. Yet here she was, before me, Karen in her body. Each body has a story. Now I was drawing a mother; I was drawing a cancer survivor.

Draw what you see.

I sketched in the scar. I sketched Karen's chin, unusually square for a narrow jawline. I shaded the deltoids as they ran down to the biceps. During the break, Marc stepped over to look at my work. Marc teaches middle-school art and knows what he's doing, though he is always critical of his own work, and he was one of the first members of the circle who was willing to pause in front of my efforts, who could find something nice to say. Now he nodded. "You're getting somewhere," he said. "Much better shading, through the torso."

"I've been working on the boobs," I said.

"Good boobs." He nodded again. "Need to strengthen this arm, though."

"I'm afraid of the hand."

"Block it out." He gestured with his index finger. Then he glanced at Karen, in her cotton robe. "She's in great shape," he said.

"I'll say," I said.

T. S. Eliot—who seems never to have drawn a picture of any sort—famously wrote, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." The realistic drawing, from life, of a human being is surely the most fundamental sort of "external fact" a human hand can create; it demonstrates, as Eliot would say, "the complete adequacy of the external to the emotion." Karen's arm—if I can strengthen the arm—will completely evoke the emotion of Karen's gesture, suspended as it is in this space. By contrast, a short story, laced with subjectivities and disguises, would seem the least obvious candidate for the

objective correlative. Yet what strikes me as I walk by my fellow sketchers' efforts, on Thursday nights, is how replete each is with the ineffable subjectivity of its creator—not only in time and space (one sketcher views the buttocks, another the breasts), but also in feeling.

For the most part, empathy is the foremost emotion brought to the sketch. As Bill the printer said one evening, "In figure drawing, a three-hundred-pound woman with a wart on her nose is beautiful. In no other art is this true. Take a photo of her, she's hideous. Sculpture's probably disturbing. But I sketch her in charcoal, and she's beautiful." Such empathy seems to come from the long minutes spent in the shared space of the barn. The more we work on a wrinkle, a birthmark, a roll of fat, the more we embrace it, each in his own way.

That our embrace involves some form of desire is not incidental to this process. The body is our communion; our rendering it on paper is a sort of possession. But on rare occasions, perambulating the room, I spot a drawing that in its exaggerated details betrays the artist's lust and little more. Invariably, these renderings, well executed though they may be, provoke no correlated desire in us who look. We tend, rather, to turn our heads, our empathy limited to the artist's need or shame.

Here, we find the same truth I try to teach students writing fiction: You cannot get to the heart of your subject if you focus on self-expression. By contrast, the more you apprehend your subject with your full being, the more it will yield a subject even greater than itself. And in the end, your own feelings will have been expressed—but in the most literal way, in that they are pressed out of you, insisted on by the process of putting the living, breathing thing onto the page.

Other writers who have taken up art have gone in directions very different from mine. Sherwood Anderson painted landscapes. For Robert Duncan, the "visual elements" of his more abstract art—"light and dark, opacity and translucence, color and mass" delineated "the syntax of a world and the lexicon of its things and beings." Vladimir Nabokov, naturally, drew butterflies. Maxine Hong Kingston keeps sketchbooks of her dreams. What I bring to my writing from my amateur experiments in figure drawing is more narrow. Focused on the naked human form, I am slowly finding my way to new ways of figuring my characters. Is not the naked body the ultimate "show don't tell"?

Karen's cancer and its remission, for instance, resided in her scar and in the taut muscles of her thighs and upper arms. It resided, too, in the slightly aggressive stance of her feet and hips, in the strained cords of her neck. That night, I didn't want to hear Karen telling Dave about her cancer; I wanted only to draw what I

saw, to produce an image on the page so evocative of what I was seeing that all who focused on the image would see the woman. And yet it was in holding the verbal knowledge of Karen's cancer in balance with the knowledge processed through the nonverbal channels of eye, hand, and charcoal that I could begin wrestling with the question of portraying a cancer survivor, this particular cancer survivor.

What I am proposing is, of course, a question of faith. On the wall of my study hangs a charcoal by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who also frequently drew from life. In it, a nude woman reclines, resting on her wrists, her face turned away from the viewer, one leg tucked under the other. Superimposed onto the calf of the outstretched leg is the face of a young man, his eyes shut as if sleeping. I am convinced—though some have claimed the reverse—that he is dreaming of her, and that she does not know of his dream. In the sketch, in other words, I see a story. Whether Ferlinghetti intended this story, or whether it traveled along the conduit (from reclining model to arm to charcoal to sketch paper) is none of my business. Perhaps it will be the business of those who write Ferlinghetti's biography. But I want to believe that so long as I draw what I see—so long as I keep the emotion centered in the object and the act—my underlying knowledge of Karen's cancer will come to enrich and not distract from the drawing at hand. I also believe that if and when a tough, mouthy cancer survivor named Karen—or Luanne, or Maria—appears in one of my stories, the exact tilt of her hip, the sculpted valley from that hip down to the wispy hair fronting her mound of Venus, will be present in that character, whether or not I describe her in the nude.

I will never reach the artistic level of Ferlinghetti—nor even of Flannery O'Connor, who was at least art editor of her college newspaper and who commented, in *Mystery and Manners*, that "any discipline can help your writing . . . particularly drawing. . . . It forces [you] to look at things." I have considered the notion of taking a class in drawing. Thus far I've rejected it, not because I cling to my amateurishness—on the contrary, my sketches often mortify me—but because the teaching would necessarily include words. Right now, in their slow, blunt way, the models are teaching me. The materials are teaching me. The work of my fellow Thursday-night drawing companions, as I wander the room during the break, is teaching me. I liken this sort of learning to a language immersion program, where nothing ever gets translated for the learner. The task of translation, if there is to be such, will be mine.

Bit by bit, my drawing has improved. A foot now lies within the realm of possibility. At the end of the evening I pack up my sketchbooks and charcoals. I bid

my fellow worshippers at the altar of figure drawing good-night. I drive home, moving from a language that sees the world in shapes and densities, light and shadow, to one comprising snatches of conversation, arguments, explanations, figures (as we say) of speech. I show my partner my sketch of the long pose and hold my breath that he might see through it to what I have been seeing. When I turn, the next day, to my work with words, bodies surround me—naked, breathing, mortal and alive.