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Introduction

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Introduction

One afternoon a few years ago, while taking on the interim directorship of our MFA program in nonfiction, I dropped in on Frank Conroy, our dear, late, lamented Frank Conroy. I'll not soon forget a story in *The Nation* that had recounted a tale Frank had told to a New York gathering and that identified him only by name. No more was needed, and few people in anyone's town earn that distinction. My mission though was merely to probe his flexibility, and risk his rascally charm, by asking whether he or any of his Workshop colleagues would care to take a turn also at teaching nonfiction. After all, they write it, he, Mark and Marilynne, Jim and Jim. "Oh, no, we can't have that," Frank replied, leaning back in his desk chair at Dey House, placing the foot attached to one lanky leg atop the knee of the other, and bringing his hands together, his long-fingered, piano-playing hands, fingers spread, finger tips touching. "In fiction, you work up the ground you move over, as you cross it. You never know where you're going." His hands parted then, their palms turned downward and toward me, as if to hand the problem over. "Nonfiction begins with an outline; you write to fulfill your prior conclusions." And that from the author of *Stop-Time*.

The assertion is an old one. Recast here as a question, it reverberates in the essays that follow, all drawn from a recent conference, "NonfictioNow," that our new director of literary nonfiction, Robin Hemley, orchestrated for last November. And a fine occasion it was, lively enough to bear repetition. I feel sure that Frank would have jammed with us had he been around to do so. We live by our contradictions and often enough for them. If fiction begins with character that, once set in motion, discovers the landscape it crosses, as do Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, then, yes, fiction cannot know where it is going until it nears arrival. If, however, an essayist discovers that her own searching mind is her best character, ready to explore her own *la Manchas*—rare, enigmatic, withering, or whatever—the case may not be all that different. Our way to the word is always a mystery, to the word that drops onto the page, the word nowhere in mind the briefest instant before, that we felt no footstep

of on the tip of our tongue before it leapt to pencil, pen, or fingertips and thence to paper. In the essays that follow, Phillip Lopate, Lauren Slater, Pico Iyer, Abigail Thomas, Amy Leach, Lia Purpura, Sheryl St. Germain, Albert Goldbarth, and David Shields all bear witness to that mystery. As they do to our imagined range of nonfiction, in pursuit always of the most expressive shape for elusive thought that cannot be known before it is uttered.

A few years earlier, late summer 1996, with another school year beginning, my wife and I hosted a supper before a reading, and fresh from the summer-long effort, I could not resist showing off the house, recently ours, that we had just painted. High gables meant ladders awkwardly placed for stretching, scraping, priming, and painting. Preferring to stretch our labor through the summer rather than concentrate it in a month, or less, I began most days reading *Of Grammatology*, hoping to carry traces of that to the ladder, all of which only reinforced my sense of our labor as epic. Frank, who stood among our guests, seemed properly impressed at first, but he soon found his way to place our efforts. "Anything's easier than writing," he remarked.

We both recognized that that was not wholly true. Try being a single mother of three, holding down two jobs, neither with benefits, and one at Wal-Mart. Besides, were it really true, we'd get many fewer submissions. But in our context that day, it was an allowable conceit, and I'll credit him with meaning "writing divinely." Frank always knew more than a bit about that, and he did not specify genre.

We miss him. I like to imagine him listening in on our conference while improvising his own fine accompaniment on a divine piano.

—DH