

## Rebecca Lee

{ IN HER WORDS }

**W**hen I was twenty-five (and still in full sway of my heart's enthusiasms), I packed up a car and headed to Iowa City. I had read *Stop-Time*, Frank Conroy's groundbreaking memoir, published in 1967, about his very difficult childhood. I say *difficult*, but that word is both an understatement and entirely beside the point, because really the book is about the absolute pleasure of being a child, and a person, just being any living thing in the world at all. Every sentence is buoyant with, in Frank's own words (though he was speaking of Dickens), "the pressure of the soul behind the work."

In the grimmest, most deprived circumstances, a person can bring such riches to the table — in *Stop-Time* the soul behind the work is debonair, dashing, plucky, interested at every moment, resourceful, and generous. (At the beginning of *Stop-Time*, the author's father has been put in a mental asylum and has no way to wash or style his hair on his own, so he uses his own pee to slick it back before a dance, and that still remains for me a detail that exemplifies a sort of off-kilter, stylish triumph over circumstance.)

I had read the book in anticipation of being Conroy's student, and for the next few months filled notebooks full of every word he said. Though he was not exactly kindly toward my work, he loved literature more than any person I've encountered since. It was the great river that ran alongside life, reflecting it, interpreting it. He was frequently annoyed with our muddying it up with our own work, but what remains for me, what really matters, was his deep faith in the power of the relationship between the writer and the reader, the profundity, primacy, and intimacy of that relationship. Listening to him talk about Dickens, on a cool, golden Midwestern late afternoon, could easily bring tears to your eyes. "He is my brother. We are cocreators. I am not alone."

The stories in this collection have placed some requirements on me and have cared deeply about things I didn't know I cared about at all: cults, the

Cultural Revolution, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the process of wheat germination, cooking, Salman Rushdie's personal life, Nixon, Margaret Thatcher, early Soviet propaganda, the tunnels under Transylvania, the architecture of the Midwest, the Hudson and the East River, any river, all rivers, et cetera, et cetera. For that, I should thank these stories.

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED what Lawrence Durrell said about writing, that the chief importance of the work is to make the writer a better, more curious person, and so therefore what is leftover in the form of the book itself is irrelevant. (This stands in a sort of worrisome opposition to what I stated earlier, Conroy's idea that what really matters is the book's ability to unite writer and reader, but somehow they both seem true to me. Same same different, as they say in Thailand.)

I think my inner life is made up almost entirely of quotes. There are lines of poetry lodged in there that reappear several times a day, just kind of fly through on their own. One line, which doesn't even sound like poetry but which I distinctly remember coming from some poem, somewhere, I recite almost every time I have to do something difficult — "It hurts to go through walls but its necessary." I've asked many poets through the years if they know what poem it's from, and they always say no, and a lot of them actually make an unpleasant face, as if they don't even think it's a very good line at all. It's not lyrical, but it's useful, like a good worn-in shovel that can get you through just about anything. And then for the dreary days, when nothing really is exciting or fortuitous or inspired, there is this: "On some days the hands do only rough work," which is a line from the great Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade. It's really about his sadness regarding what he considered to be the death of socialism in his time, but it also works for me if I have too many errands to do in a morning.

But for writing, for really getting work done, for striking the right combination of optimism and pessimism that the writer needs to get the work done, I love James Wood: "The true writer . . . is one who must always be acting as if life were a category beyond anything the novel had yet grasped."

BACK IN CONROY'S CLASS, there was one thing I did that he praised. And it wasn't really even a thing; it was a single word. One day he said he liked one

word in a story I'd written, the word *liar*. It might be the world's tiniest compliment, but I took it, and I've carried it around for years (an invisible letter of recommendation, folded in my breast pocket, to quote the poet Yehuda Amichai). One of the stories in this collection has been revised what feels like a hundred times around it. It's still there, of course, one good, true word.