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LIFE AND LETTERS

ROUGH CROSSINGS

The cutting of Raymond Carver.

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On the morning of July 8, 1980, Raymond Carver wrote an impassioned letter to Gordon Lish, his friend and editor at Alfred A. Knopf, begging his forgiveness but insisting that Lish “stop production” of Carver’s forthcoming collection of stories, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” Carver had been up all night reviewing Lish’s severe editorial cuts—two stories had been slashed by nearly seventy per cent, many by almost half; many descriptions and digressions were gone; endings had been truncated or rewritten—and he was unnerved to the point of desperation. A recovering alcoholic and a fragile spirit, Carver wrote that he was “confused, tired, paranoid, and afraid.” He feared exposure before his friends, who had read many of the stories in their earlier versions. If the book went forward, he said, he feared he might never write again; if he stopped it, he feared losing Lish’s love and friendship. And he feared, above all, a return to “those dark days,” not long before, when he was broken, defeated. “I’ll tell you the truth, my very sanity is on the line here,” he wrote to Lish.



Carver in 1984. Successful after years of obscurity, he was now confident enough to reject advice. Photograph by Bob Adelman.

Considering the dreary facts of Raymond Carver's origins, he was lucky to have survived and published at all. He was born in the logging town of Clatskanie, Oregon, in 1938, and grew up in Yakima, Washington. His mother worked as a retail clerk and a waitress, and his father, who had ridden the rails during the Dust Bowl days, was a saw filer in a lumber mill, a storyteller, a depressive, and a blackout drunk, who died at fifty-three. Before Carver was twenty, he was the father of two children, and he and his first wife, Maryann Burk, began a life of working "crap jobs" and dodging bill collectors. Over the years, Carver swept floors in a hospital, pumped gas, cleaned toilets, and picked tulips. He wanted desperately to write poems and stories about the landscapes he'd seen and the people he'd known, and he had even published a few stories in "little" magazines while studying at Humboldt State, at Chico State College (with John Gardner), and, until his money ran out, in the writing program at the University of Iowa. But he could write only fitfully. "I scarcely had time to turn around or draw a breath," he said. Alcohol soon became an even greater obstacle to writing than the need to pay the bills. Over time, there were bankruptcies, blackouts, and breakdowns, physical and mental. "I made a wasteland of everything I touched," he once remarked. "Let's just say, on occasion, the police were involved and emergency rooms and courtrooms."

In 1967, while working for the textbook publisher Science Research Associates, in Palo Alto, Carver met Lish, who was also working at a textbook publishing house. Lish, a voluble, eccentric, and literary man, began inviting Carver to his place for lunch and to talk about books. Lish was impressed by Carver, in particular by the exoticism of his characters—"hillbillies of the shopping mall," Lish later called them. Let go from S.R.A., Carver lived on severance and unemployment insurance, and was able to write stories with greater concentration. "Something happened during that time in the writing, to the writing," he said. "It went underground and then it came up again, and it was bathed in a new light for me." Lish was extremely encouraging to Carver, and when, in 1969, he moved to New York to be the fiction editor at *Esquire*, he became Carver's lifeline.

In 1971, Lish accepted Carver's story "Neighbors," and throughout the seventies he continued to publish Carver's work—stories of marriage, struggle, and the working poor—or guided him to other publications. He also consistently cut the stories to the linguistic bone, developing a uniquely spare, laconic, almost threatening aesthetic that was eventually dubbed "minimalism" or "Kmart realism."

Carver seemed only to encourage and accept Lish's ministrations—at least, until the summer of 1980. There are dozens of letters in Lish's papers at the Lilly Library, at Indiana University, that attest to Carver's gratitude to Lish for his friendship, support, and editing. After hearing the news that, at Lish's urging, McGraw-Hill had accepted his first collection, "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?," Carver gleefully wrote Lish that he intended to "set the globe

afire” and follow his lead on reworking the stories: “Tell me which ones and I’ll go after it, or them. . . . Or I will leave it up to you & you tell me what you think needs done or doing.”

The year 1977 was, for Carver, a new and miraculous beginning. His collection was nominated for a National Book Award. Even more surprising, on June 2nd, after a series of hospitalizations, he quit drinking, and stayed sober for the rest of his life. “I guess I just wanted to live,” he recalled. Around the same time, Lish left *Esquire*, but he soon accepted an invitation to join Knopf. Lish had built his reputation at *Esquire* by publishing such writers as Carver, Don DeLillo, Barry Hannah, and Richard Ford, and Carver reacted to the news of Lish’s departure from the magazine with a tribute. “Just knowing you were there, at your desk, was an inspiration for me to write,” he wrote Lish. “You, my friend, are my idea of an ideal reader, always have been, always, that is, forever, will be.”

At Knopf, Lish signed Carver to a five-thousand-dollar contract for his next collection of stories. Carver and Maryann Burk had separated, and he was living, happy and sober, with the poet Tess Gallagher. Teaching jobs and grants were also coming his way. Carver’s “second life,” as he called it, had begun.

E editing takes a variety of forms. It includes the discovery of talent in a relatively obscure literary magazine or in a “slush pile” of unsolicited manuscripts. It can be a matter of financial and emotional support in difficult times. And, once faced with a manuscript, an editor ordinarily tries to facilitate a writer’s vision, to recommend changes—deletions, additions, transpositions—that best serve the work. In the normal course of things, editorial work is relatively subtle, but there are famous instances of heroic assistance: Ezra Pound cutting T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” in half when the poem was still called “He Do the Police in Different Voices”; Maxwell Perkins finding a structure in Thomas Wolfe’s “Look Homeward, Angel” and cutting it by sixty-five thousand words.

In the years after the publication of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?,” Carver wrote a series of stories dwelling on alcoholism and wrecked marriages. They were eventually published under a title recommended by Lish: “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” According to the professors William L. Stull and Maureen P. Carroll, who, with the cooperation of Tess Gallagher, have been doing scholarly work on Carver, Lish mailed Carver an edited manuscript in the spring of 1980 containing sixteen of the seventeen stories that eventually appeared in the book. Lish had cut the original manuscript by forty per cent, eliminating what he saw as false lyricism and sentiment. Then, while Carver and Gallagher were attending a writers’ conference, Lish edited the manuscript yet again, had it retyped, and sent the pages back to Syracuse, where Carver was now living and teaching. When Carver returned home and read the manuscript, he wrote his forlorn letter to Lish.

In 1998, ten years after Carver's death, the journalist D. T. Max went to the archives at the Lilly Library to examine the Carver-Lish letters. The result was an article in the *Times Magazine* that brought that strange and shifting editorial relationship to public light. But it remains a mystery why, just two days after pleading with Lish to withdraw the book, Carver wrote another letter to him, in a far different mood, calmly discussing relatively minor editorial points, and signing off "with my love." Lish, apparently, had spoken to Carver by telephone and managed to avoid a prolonged crisis.

When "What We Talk About" was published, in April, 1981, it enjoyed enormous critical success, capped off by a front-page review in the *Times Book Review*, a rarity for a collection of short stories. The critic Michael Wood wrote that Carver had "done what many of the most gifted writers fail to do: He has invented a country of his own, like no other except the very world, as Wordsworth said, which is the world of all of us." Wood also wrote, "In Mr. Carver's silences, a good deal of the unsayable gets said." Many of those silences were the result of Lish's editing.

After years of failure, illness, work, and obscurity, Carver naturally relished the reception. The public praise also insured that he kept to himself his ambivalence about the way Lish had edited some of the stories. In Tess Gallagher's view, Lish's work encroached upon Carver's artistic integrity. "What would you do if your book was a success but you didn't want to explain to the public that it had been crammed down your throat?" Gallagher said recently. "He had to carry on. There was no way for him to repudiate the book. To do so would have meant that it would all have to come out in public with Gordon and he was not about to do that. Ray was not a fighter. He would avoid conflict because conflict would drive him to drink."

In the years following the book's publication, Carver seemed determined to keep Lish as a friend and "brother," even as an editor, but he now set stricter editorial boundaries. There was a shift in power. Carver demanded his autonomy. "Gordon, God's truth, and I may as well say it out now," he wrote in August, 1982, about his latest stories. "I can't undergo the kind of surgical amputation and transplant that might make them somehow fit into the carton so the lid will close."

Carver's next story collection, "Cathedral," was published in 1983, and was an even greater success, winning praise again on the cover of the *Times Book Review*, this time from Irving Howe, who wrote that in Carver's more expansive later work one saw "a gifted writer struggling for a larger scope of reference, a finer touch of nuance." In an interview with *The Paris Review* that year, Carver made clear that he preferred the new expansiveness: "I knew I'd gone as far the other way as I could or wanted to go, cutting everything down to the marrow, not just to the bone. Any farther in that direction and I'd be at a dead end—writing stuff and publishing stuff I wouldn't want to read myself, and that's the truth. In a review of the last

book, somebody called me a ‘minimalist’ writer. The reviewer meant it as a compliment. But I didn’t like it.”

Now Tess Gallagher is hoping to re-publish all the stories in Carver’s second book in what she believes is their “true, original” form. The story published here, “Beginners,” was the submitted draft of a story that Lish cut by more than a third and retitled “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” Gallagher is eager for people to read “Beginners.” And yet Lish’s work helped transform a more conventional story into an exemplar of an astringent and original aesthetic—the aesthetic that helped win Carver his initial following. “I see what it is that you’ve done, what you’ve pulled out of it,” Carver wrote to Lish about “Beginners” in his long, aggrieved letter, “and I’m awed and astonished, startled even, with your insights.” Carver may well have regretted, to some degree, the way a number of his stories appeared in “What We Talk About,” and, in the compendium “Where I’m Calling From,” which appeared a few months before he died, he republished three stories in their “original” form. But most of the stories, including this one, he republished as Lish had edited them.

“An editorial relationship is a private one, and nobody can see it fully and completely,” Gary Fisketjon, an editor who helped Carver make the selections for “Where I’m Calling From,” said recently. “Clearly, there was a catastrophic breakdown here that’s interesting but ultimately unknowable.” What can be known is that, by the mid-nineteen-eighties, Carver’s relationship with Lish was at an end. Lish told D. T. Max, “I don’t like talking about the Carver period, because of my sustained sense of his betrayal, and because it seems bad form to discuss this.” Gallagher, for her part, thought that Lish had been claiming too much credit for Carver’s achievements.

In 1987, Carver wrote “Errand,” a story about the death of Chekhov, his literary idol. It was published in *The New Yorker*. The same year, Carver, like Chekhov, began spitting up blood. Carver had always been, he once said, “a cigarette with a body attached to it,” and he was found to have lung cancer. He and Gallagher bought a house on the Olympia Peninsula overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and they married on June 17, 1988. Some mornings, Carver tried to write, despite his illness. “But I get so awful tired,” he said. He died on August 2nd. He was fifty years old, and “Errand” was his last story. ♦

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