

Coxie's Army, Caesar's Legions, Moses' Marchers,
Christ's Companions, Buck Rogers' children!

A speech for Humanitas and the Awards

Some years ago, I wandered into my parlor and found my 8 year old daughter, Susan, curled up reading a copy of Moby Dick. Stunned at this encounter, I circled her, waited until she looked up, and then I dared to say:

"Reading Moby Dick, eh?"

"Yup", she said.

"Ah," I said. "Er...how do you like it?"

"Great," she said. "Of course...I skip a lot."

"So do I!" I said. "So do I!"

And then my daughter said the wisest thing of all:

"Mr. Melville knows what he's doing."

And again, I wanted to cry: Yes. Oh, yes, he does.

Which is why we are here this noon today. We are here to honor writers who know what they are doing.

We honor them for the quality of that knowing and doing and because somehow it is right.

But, you may well ask, why do we need to reward excellence? Why bother with it at all?

And the answer is—for sweet survival's sake.

For the world is full of liars or, at the very least, people who edge around truth and do not know quite how to touch it. Sometimes we fall over it on our way to somewhere else. Let me give you one more family example: again, some years back, I noticed that yet another of my daughters, headed for the beach, used a certain bus-stop near our house where, as might be expected, carloads of disreputable boys pulled up, trying to lure the girls along for rides. I went to my daughter and said, "Would you mind, my dear, if I asked you to catch your bus at another, safer stop?" "Why should I mind," said my daughter, "when what you are saying is: I love you." I'll be damned, I thought, yes! That's exactly what I was saying!

So, we surprise ourselves with these truths. So, we hope, during the year, the writers of the shows we are honoring, surprise themselves and pass it on.

We need these writers because we are, most of us, mutes. We see well and hear well, but express ourselves poorly.

A writer's job, then, is to go a-journeying. If, in that journey, he finds his heart, his soul, his blood, and his dreams, we are all the richer.

On days when we do not feel brave, it may well be that his words will swim into our heads and out of our mouths, and hearing them will resolve us to action.

When we are courting our future wives, or husbands (and after all courting works both ways) and stand beneath that loved one's window at night feeling miserably poor and in want of poetry, perhaps some writer can stand behind us and speak from out of our masks. When we are finished, the loved one will cry, Yes, that's what I wanted to hear! And the poor lover will collapse with relief and think: yes, that's what I wanted to say, but didn't know how.

Life, then, is mostly inarticulate. The great truths seen, escape us. Someone must trap them in place, if only with a soft tether woven of grass.

Life is mysterious. How to catch that mystery without tearing its feathers off and grounding it forever?

Life is incredibly miraculous and beautiful. How to say all that without being obvious, banal, or embarrassing?

The number of people who can surprise themselves in this way and quickly frame and fix it, is rare. Being rare, we need them all the more, we readers and viewers, to learn when young just how to grow old or to remember when old just what that thing was that was young. They remind us how poor we were once, for perhaps we have forgotten. They tell each man who that woman is on the other side of the bed and teach that same woman who this strange beast husband is who sometimes seems a hermit because he is inarticulate. She must not be surprised if, please God, on occasion, he dares hand her a poem, or a story, or a play to teach her what he is and hope that her eyes ignite.

So often in all our years, we forget to touch, hold, love in all the small ways that love manifests.

In the old plays and stories we learn that Hamlet's father is dead, really dead, truly dead for all time, and weep for our fathers.

In our time, in MASH or Hill Street Blues we warm our hands at the steam rising from the open wounds of mortal bodies, or weep at the death of strangers on dark streets.

Old story or new, it is all the same. In the time of living, teach me love. In the time of dying, teach me forbearance and the sorrows of accommodation. In the time of rebirth, teach me celebration and hallelujahs.

So, we do not gather here to honor writers simply because they admire excellence. Excellence is only the result of their loving life well. It comes as a dividend in the process of that excitement and joy and sublime madness that we call writing. The day that these writers stop loving what they do, will be the day excellence vanishes from their part of the world. By these awards, we add yet another dividend to those they have already won: themselves! We respond to their work by saying: I was glad to journey with your friends, I am sorry that this time is over. Whoever those people were, half real, half-dream, I hope

we meet again. And if you should ever travel with those bright strangers another time, I hope you will tell me.

On a day like this, we place our ideas and their writers back in the center of our lives, to give them proper recognition and celebratory love.

For if we do not honor ourselves and the celebrators of ourselves, whom should we honor? If we pretend at worshipping a Universe and the God that lurks at every threshold, how can we refuse to acknowledge His handiwork—these Idea Beasts who walk crippled to arrive tall, who move from the ancient dark, all burning bright.

We are a sad, terrible, lovely, brutal, wondrous mob, with the artist writer at the center of the tatterdemalion parade, quoting Shakespeare. Coxie's Army, Caesar's Legions, Moses' marchers, Christ's companions, Buck Rogers children, oh how we run, in funerals and triumphs.

And we have need, in all of this, for those who look and truly see, hear and truly hear, touch and tell us shapes, taste and tell the vintage of each year, and then—embrace it all! Good and evil... light and dark...down into the microcosms, outward to the stars.

These writers say: I lived today, and here is my life. I dreamed last night, and here is my dream. My nightmares? Yes—they're here—choose one.

These writers add: you say you live alone? I've come to visit. Grant me room. I'll tell a tale.

So now, their tales are old, and acted out and judged...

The rest, in the next five minutes, is history. To all of us, writers and viewers, congratulations!