

Speech, Humanitas Luncheon

A guy goes into a butcher shop. He sees in the display case two piles of brains. On one of them it says, 'Executive Brains—\$2.98 a pound.' On the other it says, 'Writers' Brains—39 cents a pound.' So he says to the butcher, "Hey, why are the Executives' brains so much more than the Writers'?" And the butcher says, "Are you kiddin' me? Y'know how many executives you have to catch to get a pound of brains?"

Is there anyone in this room who hasn't experienced that great, yawning gulf between the folks with the pens and the folks with the power? And doesn't it seem that the gulf is growing ever wider? Why, when I started, you say—having gotten your WGA card last year, five years ago, twenty years ago—things were better. Not good, but better. The networks wanted to do shows full of human values. The studios wanted to make the Pawnbroker. What's become of the industry?

And everybody's got a story. Well, more than one, certainly, but one that is especially juicy. And condemning. Of course, before that, everyone has the shared story, the common tale of a writer of human values in Hollywood.

It is the story of the pitch meeting. You go in. You chose the Levi look this time. Let them wear the suits. And you enter an executive's office only to be met by four walls of brightly colored scripts, floor to ceiling, stacked eight feet high, duly dusted by the maintenance workers in the darkness of night. And during the meeting your eyes can't help wandering to the stacks, searching the spines until you find a magic-markered title that rings a painful bell. It is yours. From...ten years ago, maybe? A child of yours, almost forgotten. Buried unborn. And how many other writers' babies are stacked in that room? And how many rooms just like that one are there in this town? But that's okay, you say. It was just ink and paper. And creativity. And, you know ink and paper are cheap. And you hope that creativity is unfailing, a spring eternal. La Source Perrier. It is not, you pray, that one of your legs is hollow, and filled with the stuff of creation, and that each script sitting on those shelves has used up a bit of it, and even though you can afford to eat more nowadays, you feel disconcertingly lighter.

Paranoia. A common disease among writers. But as I said, each one of us has a specific story. Something that really did happen. Something that reveals this Grand Canyon of disparity between all the usses and all of them. I have one. I thought it would follow this happy train of thought quite nicely.

Last November I, along with several other writers, was asked to take a tour of Somalia. This was before the Marines. Before anybody cared about Somalia. The UN was feeling desperate. For every ten dollars they'd received for famine relief in Ethiopia they'd received only one dollar for Somalian aid. The Western public could bear but one famine a decade.

So they'd gotten the idea of taking a crew of Hollywood writers around to see the sights, hoping that they would come up with something—a feature, a TV movie, a cable movie, an episode of a series. Anything to get the word out.

When we returned from the trip people asked, what was it like? But we all found it too difficult to describe, so I typed something from the journal I kept and gave it to the questioner to read:

Baidoa, Somalia Nov. 10

We land on an airstrip in the middle of nowhere. The plane can only stop long enough for us to unload, then has to fly away. The field isn't safe. I have to pee. I walk off the tarmac toward the bush. Hey, the pilot yells, motioning me back, it's mined.

Baidoa was a resort someone says. I don't get the concept of a resort that is 120 on a cool day. We drive down the potholed main street. The town is in ruins, rubble everywhere—heaps of burning trash, tires, car parts, tin shacks and chicken coops where people live, children in gray tatters playing, women cooking over open fires. The long, rambling street is alive with activity, the business of living taking over now that the shooting has passed.

But it is in the intensive feeding center that the situation comes into hard focus. An airless building with cavelike rooms off a central corridor, it is so dark we stumble over children lying like rags, too weak to react. One Irish nurse works steadily, professionally, somehow not overwhelmed by the misery. She says, "Yes, they all look as if they'll die, but we only lost one yesterday." It was a fourteen year old girl we saw carried to the 'dead truck'. I have a fourteen year old daughter.

Our guards, boys with automatic rifles, are getting restless. They want to go.

We step outside, sweat running off us, getting used to the twin odors of burning trash and human feces. But just then an older man trundles up his wooden barrow carrying a grotesque stick person. It is impossible to tell the sex. The body contains no fat. He or she is young, the skull lying sideways, long skeleton legs covered with sores trailing awkwardly. Two men carry him to the doorway of the building and leave him. The barrow owner trundles away. Our guards wait in the merciless heat, playing with their rifles. We hesitate, brushing at the flies, wanting to see the nurse come out and take charge of her new patient. But nothing happens. Finally, we hurry in, down the dim hallway to find her busy, spooning food into a baby too weak to swallow.

She returns with us and takes over. There is no reaction in her eyes. She begins questioning the victim, touching him, inspecting the ashen skin, the sores, feeling his pulse. But in the middle of this a teenager walks up, holding out a bundle of rags. In it is the face of a tiny ancient man. Then we see a hand, a foot not bigger than a doll's. It is a baby in the very last stages of starvation, staring, listless, weightless, beyond suffering. We can't help crying. It's not something we want to do. It doesn't help. Our guards are beginning to play with the mounted machine gun. We have to go. Calmly, the nurse touches the baby, asking questions. The last answer I hear from the translator is that they walked ten days without food. Then we leave.

Now, to me this is a story. At least the start of a story. Something people should know. Should feel. Something important. Something that will expand the viewer's mind. Beyond 21 inches.

But how can I make a deal? Does anyone out there want to make my film? Any studio, network, cable outlet? Anybody? What do you think the answer is?

And so I say, gee, things are bad. Worse than when I got my first project done, a sweet little piece about chemical poisoning. But. But. Then I do some research. I read about the history of Hollywood, and right away I understand that no, nothing has changed. The movies began with a little group of people trying to create a thrill or a giggle. If you want to send a message Sam Goldwyn supposedly said, call Western Union. In 1926 it was easier to make Ben Hur than it was to listen to some scruffy Socialist writer's pitch

for a story that reflected the real values of the day. In 1993 it is easier to make Jurassic Park than it is to listen to me, pitching the miseries of the Somalian Holocaust.

And so I arrive at the crux of my speech. Finally. Given that Hollywood is not, never was, and never will be about tough, socially relevant fare—about meaning, about values—and given that you did not need my speech to tell you this, you already knew, you’ve known for a long time, then: I am here today to laud your efforts. Knowingly, you accept the fact that you inhabit the perimeter of the Hollywood Circle and not its center rubbing elbows with the Last Action Hero. Knowingly, you go to executives’ offices and see your unmade, important scripts lining the walls. Knowingly, you have chosen to fight the good fight, against the odds, against history. And every once in a while you win.

And as a consequence all of us win—the creative community, the caring producers and gutsy executives here today, even the studios and networks that turned you down. Because we get to experience the fruits of your labor. To be informed. To be moved. Honestly. To understand something real.

And that kind of victory—for all of us— is the very sweetest there can be. And so, from all of us, I give you my deepest thanks.