



JOSEPH SQUIER + NAN GOGGIN

# THE MORAL OF THE FABLE IS...

Once upon a time there were two very clever curators who had an idea. Their idea was to create an exhibition dealing with how artists transform material from the real world into artistic inventions. They toyed with the idea of explosions. Unnerving and awe-inspiring, explosions convey, in particularly dramatic yet timely fashion, dilemmas particular to our post-9/11 world. The curators decided that an exhibition about explosions would be perfect for their purposes. And thus was born the concept for what would eventually become an exhibition called *Blown Away*. At the time of this writing, *Blown Away* is installed at the Krannert Art Museum on the University of Illinois campus in Champaign-Urbana.

Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox, the two curators in question, eventually found themselves with a collection of the work of twenty-one artists, all of whom dealt with "a singular moment in the cycle of the explosion." The work that Duggan and Fox selected did not focus on the violence and sensationalism that we have become accustomed to in the mass media. Instead, the work in *Blown Away* draws attention to the beauty of the physical form, and focuses on explosive moments across a broad array of natural phenomenon—a sneeze, a volcanic eruption, a chemical reaction. The exhibition features a variety of media, from video and installation to painting and sculpture, all of which dwells in some way on the intensity of expectation, release, or reverberation from a dramatic event at a particular decisive moment.

The exhibition catalog for *Blown Away* reproduces all the work in the show, with an insightful overall analysis by Duggan and an engaging essay by Fox on Michelangelo Antonioni's classic 1966 film *Blow-Up*. But there are also two brilliant surprise catalog essayists. One, Tony Leggett (aka Sir Anthony), happens to be a physics professor at the University of Illinois and is considered a world leader in the theory of low-temperature physics. In 2003, his pioneering work on superfluidity earned him a Nobel Prize. Leggett's essay discusses the physics of explosions, plus supercooling and how it relates to the mythic "ice-IX" that played a prominent role in Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle*.

The longest essay in the catalog was written by Dave King, author of the novel *The Ha-Ha*, a story that revolves around Howie, who at age eighteen gets shipped to Vietnam and on the sixteenth day of his tour is permanently disabled by a land mine explosion. Howie sustains a brain injury that does not diminish his mental functioning but impairs his ability to communicate with others. Now in his forties, Howie can't really speak, read, or write; instead he communicates mostly through a series of gestures and grunting sounds.

One of the central components in *The Ha-Ha* is Howie's vivid memory of the explosion—the orange dust that suddenly fills the air as one of his buddies slowly tumbles above him. This moment of "exchanging one life for another," as King describes it, also supplies the novel with its lyrical and metaphorical qualities. And for the reader, this passage in the book detonates its own unexpected and transformative event. It is the moment when a story about a wounded Vietnam vet splits open and propels us into a tale about catastrophic loss, isolation, and the struggle to connect our inner lives and interior thoughts with the outside world.

King's catalog essay is intriguing in the context of the *Blown Away* exhibition, but also because it talks about the creative writing process. Essentially, King reproduces an in-class writing exercise that he likes to conduct during a typical first meeting for one of his creative writing courses (in this instance, he didn't have access to students so he met some friends in a classroom, bribing them with the promise of wine). As such, his essay provides a glimpse behind the curtain into such questions as how authors invent stories, structure narratives, and navigate the limitless choices and possibilities that lie just beyond or behind the blank page (or is it a screen these days?). Of equal interest, King delves into the relationship between author and reader, constructing it as a creative and mutually dependent contract in which the reader is constantly reacting to and embellishing what may be only minimal prompts from the author.

King's background was also intriguing to us. In addition to holding an MFA in creative writing from Columbia University, he also earned a BFA in painting and film from Cooper Union. Because *Ninth Letter* is a magazine that seeks to situate itself at the intersection of literary and visual culture, his history within both realms piqued our curiosity. In particular, we wanted to get a better understanding of how, if at all, these two creative practices—the literary and the visual—intersected or interacted within his own creative process.

So we contacted Dave and asked if we could not only reproduce his catalog essay, but if he would also allow us to transcribe and publish a short telephone interview. Although he was scheduled to leave the country in only a day or two, he was surprisingly accommodating and generous with his time. We also encountered someone who was unassuming, dauntingly knowledgeable about art history, and damn funny.

Reproduced on the following pages are Dave King's essay "BOOM," excerpts from our phone conversation, and images from the *Blown Away* exhibition.



# DAVE KING

THOUGHTS ON NARRATIVE, DESTRUCTION, AND THE  
INCURSION BY TRUTH INTO THE MADE-UP REALM

## ONCE UPON...

Once upon a time there was a woodcutter or a maiden or a family of bears. It almost doesn't matter which. Or once upon a time there was an entire kingdom. There was a king or perhaps a prince who required a wife; a wife who wanted a child; a girl who was granted three wishes or sent on an errand or left home to finish her chores or told of a single locked room hidden somewhere on the estate. There were great beauties in huts at the edges of forests and youths who set out with their possessions wrapped in kerchiefs attached to the ends of sticks. There were girls living pioneer lives at the edges of prairies. There were changelings and chickens, gods and goddesses, horses and bears and Raggedy Ann dolls, all of whom led peaceful, ordinary lives doing the things that beauties, youths, prairie girls, changelings, chickens, deities, mammals, Raggedy Ann, and everyone else does, simply in the course of everyday existence. Once upon a time there were a horse and a bear.

## **1:** A HORSE AND A BEAR MEET SOMEWHERE AT SOME TIME. DESCRIBE IN A SENTENCE OR TWO.

The horse and the bear are waiting at a bus stop...  
—Hillary Poriss, Professor of Music History

A story begins, and in that instant the mind is processing. We picture the bus stop: a glass hut with a bench, just like the bus stops in the town where we were raised. Or it's a plain yellow sign, like those where we are now. Mentally riffing through bus stop options, we select one reflexively, then move on to other elements. The bear smokes as he waits.

...The time is 5:00pm.  
—Poriss

It's too early in this essay to claim that the story *explodes* in our minds, and the radial symmetry of twenty-first century combustion technology may not be precisely how narrative takes hold. But some rapid-fire chain reaction definitely occurs. Poriss's first words give us the mammals, and perhaps we see them in a woodland setting, grazing, stalking, walking on all fours. They are creatures of fur and claw, and the horse seems vulnerable in the way one is vulnerable in the presence of a bear. Then the bus stop's added, and a whole urban world springs up, canceling the woods.

The bear who just nanoseconds earlier was a creature of pure appetite now navigates a bus system; chances are he's put on a shirt. Undoubtedly he's lost some fierceness in those nanoseconds, but as he puffs lazily at his butt he's gained the gruff sangfroid of the contemporary town dweller, comfortable if somewhat bored by the wait. The horse, too, checking his watch and craning at the traffic, acquires elements of a character. Practically the next thing you expect from them is speech.

## **2:** WHAT DOES THE HORSE SAY?

There's an exercise I've done for years with students, and I've taken the steps of that exercise as the section headings for this essay. The assignment is drawn from *Beat Not the Poor Desk*, the poet Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen's book on the teaching of writing, and the task is to compose a simple story in class. I often plan this for the first day of the course, and as I write the instructions one by one on the blackboard I tell the kids their work won't be graded; credit only for completion. Then, at the end of the session, a few brave souls read their stories aloud—

"Whinny," said the startled horse. "Fancy meeting you here. I figured I was the only survivor."

—Arden Reed, Professor of English

or

"Don't you miss the Arctic?" asks the horse.

—Christina Huemer, Librarian

—and we see how the armature's been tweaked to each writer's needs (while I, of course, learn who the brave souls are). For literature students, it's an opportunity to revisit the creative process, to remember how hard it is to make something from blank paper (as students, those most ruthless, binary critics, often forget), and to rediscover the elation of imagining when the pressure to perform is lifted.

I'm not teaching this term, and I have no student exercises to draw on as examples, so a small group of erudite friends agreed to stand in as mock freshmen. We met one afternoon in a room with a lectern and plenty of chairs and a couple of bottles of wine, and despite the wine we played school for half an hour. The samples included here are from the stories created that day, and the snippets are keyed to the steps that inspired them. Gods of the creative process, smile on my five friends for this favor!

### 3: WHAT DOES THE BEAR SAY IN RESPONSE?

So the story grows as something intuitive and therefore organic.

The bear ignores the horse. He *hates* horses, the result of an incident that occurred in the woods some time back, when the bear was a cub. This is an incident the bear would like to forget—let's just say it involved a can of beer and a bad attitude. Enough said.

—Poriss

Imagine the jerky, intuitive probing of a root seeking nutrients under the sod. One path is chosen (the bear's a neurotic), and others fall from contention. Yet the imagination moves forward with what it's got, seeking and selecting like that hungry root. The process *feels* instantaneous—it feels like something's ignited, but if it bursts at all, it bursts into bloom, and what flowers is that time upon which once was related a tale.

Once upon a time there was stasis. Every narrative has a before-point, the action *before* the action begins, when life is ordinary and looks to remain so. The bus will arrive, and the bear will drop his cigarette in the dust. He'll climb aboard, already contemplating the osso bucco he'll make for dinner, but the night will be so much like other nights in the bear's life that horse, bus, and osso bucco will all be forgotten. Similarly, the woodcutter will remain humble, and Christmas will bring another orange to the plains. Raggedy Ann will gaze out the bedroom window in null contemplation, and pigs will continue to take bourgeois satisfaction in their straw, wood, and brick real estate. The stasis is the part of the story before anyone realizes there might be incident enough to comprise a story; it's a vision of the good life, the life we ourselves lead or hope to lead, yet we can hardly wait for it to end.

### 4: WHAT DOES THE HORSE SAY?

Speechless again. Internalized thoughts.

—Thomas Tsang, Architect

I have a friend with whom I see disaster flicks, and his favorite passages are inevitably the first forty minutes, when a small world is limned out in quick bright detail. Here, too, is the stasis before the story begins, before the cataclysm that's the reason the film was made and the reason, ostensibly, we've paid for our seats. Yet when that cataclysm finally arrives, my friend will pretend to leave, gathering his coat and huffing a bit when I shove him back in his seat. This is the small charade he performs to suggest he's had his fill, and though I insist he stay, he's probably right. Bite for bite, those opening sequences are more nourishing than anything still to come, and for contradictory reasons.

No other commercial genre takes so long to get revved up. A thriller will generally go right to the crime, and in a romance the principals meet cute early on. But a disaster film dawdles. The setting may be a mountain town or a cruise ship or a beach resort or some other colorful spot, but what's important isn't sand or snow; it's the vision of community. Even the players may not exactly pop. We recognize the stars, of course, and a host of character actors chewing the scenery, but these introductory scenes are ensemble sequences—the large cast narrows by attrition—and what's established is texture, not star wattage.

(Interestingly, a similar point can be made about reality TV. The contestants, whether through coaching, editing, or the irresistible human slide toward exhibitionism and mugging, quickly become stock characters, and the shows work best when interaction dominates, rather than any individual persona.)

The comfort of these scenes is entirely archetypal. Five or six lightly braided narratives are presented in broad strokes, and a fine demonstration of the force of cliché ensues. For this is no real world, but a kind of artist's conception, a sketch of someplace to care about. In this sketch, neighbors are neighborly. Diligence earns a one-way ticket to prosperity; majority and democracy reflect each other symbiotically; and guns are not carried by ordinary citizens. A portrait of society as idealistic as it is false, and since most of us know no *actual* ideal places, what we feel in place of identification are nostalgia and wistfulness. The dream of someone else's simplicity can be endlessly reassuring. But if there's pleasure in the vision of other people, elsewhere, living humbly and well, there's a simultaneous tingle that says it won't last. In fact, we *hope* it won't last, since no one—excepting possibly my softhearted friend—goes to the theater to watch the stasis.

Think of childhood. We build a town on the playroom floor, murmuring contentedly as we work. Here are the school, the doctor's house, the hospital. Here's the train station, and this way the trains run: picking up commuters, delivering newspapers and ringing their bells beneath piano and couch. A little town.

We step back to admire our handiwork, then we crash the trains into each other or into a house that's somehow gotten built in their path, or the trains run over a small plastic infantryman lying facedown on the tracks. And that's delightful too, not for any

antipathy toward drunken soldiers, but because it's *interesting* to watch the stiff plastic figure skid along before the cowcatcher. The before-story's likeable, but in the service of narrative it's also dispensable, and after the movie ends we stroll from the theater. Outside, nothing's burning. Nothing's frozen or covered in lava. In the parking lot, the smell of milkweed.

And yet, I understand my friend's impulse to evacuate pre-disaster, while modesty and neighborliness still predominate, before the real estate collapses. There's a similar dialectic at play between sandcastle and surf, though I personally try to pack up before the tide comes in. *That* catastrophe I can never ever bear to watch.

## **5: C A T A S T R O P H E !** **PLEASE INVENT A DISASTER OF YOUR OWN CHOOSING**

Suddenly a tidal wave, unleashed by the same earthquake that had run the ark aground, struck the beach. It lifted both animals thirty feet in the air and flung them down in the midst of the jungle undergrowth.

—Reed

The family of mice that had been nesting in a tangle of wires whose casing had long since disappeared couldn't have expected the stable hand's lit cigarette butt, which ignited the rafters and quickly engulfed the upper reaches of the barn in flames and dense smoke.

—Meisha Hunter, Historic Preservationist

The bus comes whizzing by (this, incidentally, is Rome), and WHACK! The horse gets pummeled... SPLAT!!! Blood, guts everywhere! So disgusting!!! The bear smiles.

—Poriss

At that moment, there is a flash of lightning, the skies darken, and it starts hailing!! The horse whinnies and takes flight. The polar bear, still in his cage, looks up wonderingly.

—Huemer

Cloud and fog mistaken for each other.

—Tsang

What constitutes a catastrophe? I have a friend, a Renaissance scholar, who describes great cultural or intellectual events as *earthquakes* and *volcanoes*. There are passages in his area of study that were so shocking, so compelling and innovative in their time that something shifted, and afterward, as he puts it, the world looked different. My friend speaks allegorically, of course, and since history is often related as narrative, the presence of a transforming event gives a story shape. (But the transforming event may itself be a mythic beast, a medievalist friend warns darkly. A gryphon, a Pegasus, a projection, a hope. Progress, she claims, is constant and incremental—not explosive. In history circles the battles rage on.) Still, allegories are not fiction. They're not meant to be taken literally, and no one would confuse an allegorical volcano with the real thing. Would they?

## 6: WHAT DOES THE BEAR SAY NOW?

from Jami Hemmenway  
to davekingwriter@gmail.com  
date Jan 4, 2007 7:14 PM  
subject Land mine question

Hello,

I'm currently visiting my brother who stepped on a land mine in Nam and lost both legs. As I was reading your description in *The Ha Ha* of [the character's] memories of 16 days into Nam and stepping on a land mine, I asked my brother to verify the experience. After he read your description, he said that he had experienced just the opposite while in the air ~ a total lack of any sensory experience. In fact, he said that two seconds more of sensory deprivation would have driven him insane. He added, tho, that your description was probably right on for many people.

My question, then, is how did you research this particular part of the book? Was your father in Nam or did you talk to veterans? You have a lovely, poetic way of expressing some of life's harshest moments, so keep up the good work!

Jami Hemmenway

P.S. I plan to teach this book in my Eureka College literature class next fall, so any info is helpful. Thanks.

What is the role of art in all this? My novel *The Ha-Ha* had been out almost two years when the email came in, and by then I'd received many compliments on the passage. It's a key passage, barely more than a page long and only twenty-seven pages in, in which the protagonist, Howard Kapostash, compulsively recalls and relives a disabling injury. For readers, this is the first hint of the book's lyrical content, since up to this point the text has remained modest, and though Vietnam isn't named, details of the explosion are revealed. A trio of guys, two with no battle experience. All a little high and chatting diffidently on patrol; then the air goes bright. These are the last moments of Howard's normally abled self, and instead of the blankness Professor Hemmenway's brother describes, he experiences a rush of intense sensory apperception. Returning to that memory over the course of the book, Howard invests certain images—the orange dust, his buddy slowly turning above him—with metaphoric power, and for the reader, too, those moments of floating evoke the unexpected exchange: one kind of life for another.

The scene was important to the writer, too. It wasn't the first bit I wrote, but it was the first to capture the kind of swooping emotional range that would become the novel's signal trait. It helped me discover what I aimed for in my book, and when, on a spring morning in upstate New York, I finished the draft, I knew something unexpected had arisen. A kind of breakthrough, a passage of highly interior, highly intuitive work which felt instantly true and right on the page; of course it was pure invention. For what

else could it be? If only those who experience catastrophe wrote about catastrophe, a whole lot of books would not get written. And the fact remains that despite my book's noble aspects—its anti-war stance, its decent vision of vets and disability—I *needed* “a lovely, poetic way of expressing some of life's harshest moments,” as Professor Hemmenway put it. I needed this not just to capture brute reality, but to set the book's formal and structural tones, to make it readable and interesting, to make it art.

My correspondent and her brother are generous. A book, play, or movie doesn't conform to our experience, and most of us initiate a mean game of *gotcha!*—yet this the brother courteously resists. And one thing artists *do* is aestheticize experience. We make it bigger or sexier, funnier or sadder or more politically cohesive, or we tilt it in such a way that the light shows its textures. In serious art a greater good (emotion, insight, activism, inquiry, or something far less tangible) is thought to justify those means. And yet...

Art is, fundamentally, an act of faith. You act on faith, then you let go, hoping the work will find an audience. It seems it does, and years may pass before you encounter someone whose experience mirrors your invention, except that it's not fiction, not allegory, not fairy tale, not myth. *Then* you wonder if you got it right. “What would that *really* feel like?” you can't help asking yourself.

From Dave King <davekingwriter@gmail.com>  
to Jami Hemmenway <[REDACTED]>  
date Jan 10, 2007 11:25 PM  
subject Re: Land mine question

Dear Ms Hemmenway,

Thank you so much for writing. One of the unexpected pleasures of publishing this book has been hearing from readers, and I'm always touched when someone takes the time to send a few words. And I apologize for the delay in my response; I was visiting my elderly father over the holidays, and I kind of let cyberspace get away from me. I do appreciate your note, though.

As to your question about the explosion passage, it was largely imagined. Of course, I did plenty of research on Vietnam, and, as someone who grew up in the sixties, I began with a backlog of visceral knowledge about the war. (In fact, I barely missed going myself.) War memoirs do tend to describe the moments of injury, and your brother is right: some soldiers have clear recollections of time slowing down and becoming very vivid, while others experience a kind of empty bubble. I went with the former because it struck me as more dramatic narratively—fundamentally, it was something I could describe and that Howard could point to as a significant experience. But there's one other source I drew on, and that's my grandfather's experience of a head wound in World War I. My grandfather endured months of rehabilitation and continued to experience flashbacks during my mother's childhood, and his telling of wartime experiences is a strong childhood memory of mine.

Thank you so much for teaching the book. This is one way it's found an audience, and I really appreciate it. I send my best wishes for a good new year to you and also to your brother, of course.

Yours sincerely,

DK



**7:**

(END OF STORY)

**AND****FINALLY,****WHAT DOES THE HORSE SAY?**

The desperate whinnying of the horse reached the park ranger's ears, but too late.

—Hunter

How blithely we deploy tragedy! Stories need conflict, I tell my students, so invent a disaster. And because it's a classroom exercise or because it's a favor with wine among friends, the disasters tend to the lighthearted (**WHACK!** and **SPLAT!!!**). "Uh-oh," some student inevitably pipes up as Instruction Seven registers. "Professor, my horse can no longer talk." Make the best of it, I say; it's not that important. Remarkable, the range of easy bad ends that poor horse has endured over the years—though its vulnerability at the outset may predispose it for injury! Then the students read their work aloud, and we laugh at the animals' misfortunes. We're delighted by the invention right there in our presence, by the fact that any of us can summon a tale in this way. A miracle.

But increasingly as I read through my classroom papers, what I enjoy most are the first steps of the exercise. I love the before-stories, when the students are told to place their encounter anywhere, and they choose a bus stop or a desert island or the Pacific Northwest. I love the host of unexpected details—**an incident that occurred in the woods some time back**—tucked in, for this *really* is the way art works, as much for the author's amusement as for the reader's. I love how everyone understands without being told that those few lines of dialogue will pinpoint a character, especially in such a stripped-down format. Polite or stuffy or hip or trusting, a relationship arises in each impromptu horse/bear exchange, and because, unlike most readers of stories, I know where the template's headed, I remember my friend who prefers the first acts of disaster movies. The horse and bear kill time at the bus stop, and I admit I don't blame him for bailing while the scene's still placid, on an evening both characters still have the luxury of forgetting, before disaster strikes.

**8:**

**PLEASE READ THROUGH WHAT YOU'VE WRITTEN. MAKE ANY CHANGES YOU LIKE, AND DON'T WORRY IF YOU HAVEN'T FOLLOWED THE STEPS EXACTLY. THEN COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCE:**

## 9: "THE MORAL OF THIS FABLE IS..."

Once upon a time, of course, it was a bright September day. We were living in the Village then, in a small shabby apartment I liked for its hip location, its pink and black bathroom, and the view of downtown, which you could just catch a glimpse of if you hung out the kitchen window. All of us rose early, and the dog and I walked my partner to a bakery, then he drove on to Brooklyn, and we two strolled to the river, stopping for the paper and then again at each street corner. The dog we had then didn't require a leash, and she'd run ahead of me to every intersection, sitting and waiting until I caught up. "Run across," I'd say when the traffic was clear, and she'd dart forth.

The river sparkled, the shifting leaves caught the lambent light, the breeze was fragrant, and so on. Everyone knows what kind of day it was. The dog was afraid of dogs but enjoyed squirrels, and we'd found a section where the dog/squirrel ratio was to her taste. I drank my coffee and read a paper which that day was full of ordinary news, now long since forgotten, and the dog barked at squirrels. Because I loved her so much I found the racket heartening. After an hour or so we walked home.

I was still working on *The Ha-Ha* then, and I must have been already at work when the phone rang. I give my students my home phone number because I dislike the complicated voicemail at the college, and sometimes at the beginning of term they're reluctant to call, but that wasn't the case today. "Professor," a voice said. "Are we having class?"

I liked this girl. We'd had only one session together because it was September, but already I knew she was one of the brave souls, a friendly, ambitious sweetie with a pursed smile and a veil of baby fat she would shed in the next few years. I cultivate a relaxed persona in the classroom, and though my skin crawls at the stereotype, I'm one of those instructors who believe they can crack wise, so I said, "Well, I think so. It's Tuesday!"

Perhaps my student gave a small gasp, or maybe that's just a writer's enhancement. Certainly there was a pause before she said, "Professor, I think you need to look out the window."



## AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE KING

**NINTH**

Are you still painting?

**DK**

No, I'm a writer now.

**NINTH**

Do you have to be one or the other?

**DK**

I was a painter for about ten years. My undergraduate degree was in painting and film. After college I continued to paint—I was part of the East Village scene for a number of years, then tended bar and drove a cab and stuff like that. I started a decorative painting business with a partner, and that was intended to support my art career, but in fact the business became so successful that it took over and replaced my art career. So for another ten years I was a businessman working in the decor and design industry.

**NINTH**

So, did you actually meet Henry Kissinger?

**DK**

No, but my partner did. And Nixon. and Barbara Walters and various other people.

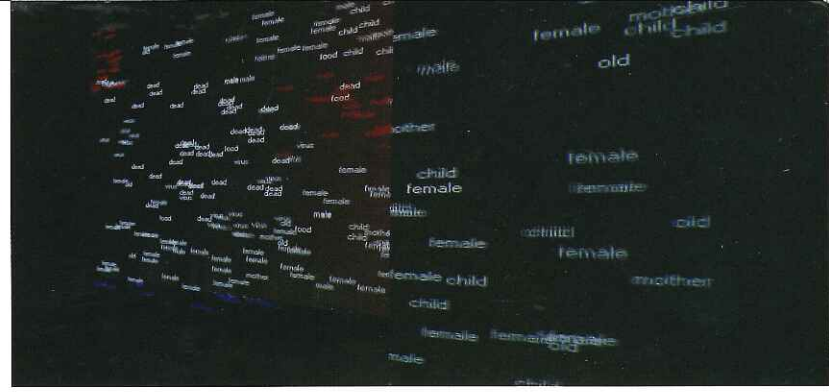
At some point I realized I had drifted a little bit far from the creative life that I had originally set for myself, and so I took a writing course at the Y, and then I took another one. And that led gradually to leaving my company and going to graduate school at Columbia and getting an MFA and pursuing writing after that.

**NINTH**

Did your paintings have a strong narrative quality?

**DK**

They did. They weren't strictly realistic in terms of having horizon lines and things like that, but they did include representational elements. Probably the closest parallel would be someone like de Chirico.



**NINTH**

Do you mean without people and maybe dark and lonely?

**DK**

Yeah, odd spaces and strange little scenes. And people would often say, "These evoke some kind of story, but we're not party to what the story is."

**NINTH**

Are there things you can do as a writer that you couldn't do as a painter? Or vice versa?

**DK**

That's an interesting question. I think that's a really personal question because there are certainly things I do as a writer that other people are able to do as painters.

When I was a painter I was very young and I had a certain facility, but not a tremendous amount of maturity. For me, painting was often a way of speaking in code; of creating suggestive spaces and suggestive narratives that were attractive and intriguing but didn't really go as deep as I wanted to go.

I think it's no accident that when I came back to making art and wanted to work more substantively that I began writing. It's an area where I'm able more comfortably to tell the truth, and to say things that are a little more profound and deeper than I was ever able to do with painting.

But again, that may just be a question of youth and maturity. When you're in your twenties you're drawn to certain things, but it's possible that had I kept painting for the last 20 years, I would have discovered a way toward something more profound. But that's not quite the direction things took.

**NINTH**

Do you visualize when you're writing?

**DK**

Oh yeah. You know John Gardner has this idea of "a vivid and continuous dream," and he says that it's the writer's job to create this dream in the mind of the reader. In other words, the story kind of springs up spontaneously in the reader's head.



I try to do that. I try to imagine the characters and the spaces. So for instance in *The Ha-Ha* the house is a central element so I made floor plans to work out some of my ideas visually.

## NINTH

Are you still writing poetry?

### DK

Yeah, but I haven't published any in a while. At present I'm working to finish a novel, and the long haul of the novel is such a different experience from the sense of compression required to write a poem. It's hard for me to do both with any consistency, so I'm working very hard on the novel and sometimes writing poems on the side as relaxation. But if I ever decide to publish a book of poems it will require my setting aside time to do nothing but write poems for a fair amount of time.

There are writers who move easily between fiction and poetry and do both very fluidly. Thomas Hardy is an example, but that's not the case for me.

## NINTH

What painter from history do you think would have made an excellent writer?

### DK

I don't think he would have had the patience for it, but obviously Carravagio has a fantastic narrative sense.

Bernini actually was a writer. There's a famous story about an opera performance in Rome during his lifetime in which he had written the play on which the opera was based, composed the music, conducted the orchestra, designed the costumes and sets, built the theater, and designed the square where the theater stood. Bernini was an astonishing genius in every way.

I bet Courbet would have written fantastic porn. On the other hand I bet Max Beckman would have written fantastic porn, but of a very different kind. Maybe to some people a more interesting variety.

I'm writing a novel at present that has a little digression, that may eventually be edited out by the time it's finished, where Max Beckman is the exemplar of kinky sex. A woman goes to a Beckman exhibition and realizes that all around her people are kissing and making out and can't keep their hands off each other, which is based on an experience I actually had at a Beckman show several years ago.

## NINTH

What was your thought process in deciding what you wanted to write for the *Blown Away* exhibition? Can you talk about how you arrived at the final piece for the catalog?

### DK

Let me try to resurrect that process. Because once something like that is done it feels like it arose in some kind of orderly fashion, but it didn't at all.

I made a couple of false starts. At one point I was thinking of writing a very traditional work of fiction, but that went in another direction. I still like the story but it wasn't appropriate for the catalog.

I had this primary impulse about a writing exercise that I've done for years that I like very much. I was thinking about one particular step, which is the catastrophe that occurs about two-thirds of the way through that setup, and I was thinking about why it's interesting and what it does narratively. It struck me that on some level it's the kind of change that happens when something explodes in your life. And also I liked the idea of bringing in other voices.

So I was kind of just fiddling around with it, like moving different parts around. There really is a kind of analog to art-making there, in that I was collaging and trying to free associate a bit.

And then I got an e-mail from a woman whose brother had been severely injured in Vietnam. It was a very compelling message to receive for a number of reasons, but particularly because my novel was about a guy who was injured in Vietnam and the message very gracefully yet firmly contradicted what I had written in the novel. And that got me thinking about the way that artists sometimes transform disasters for artistic use.