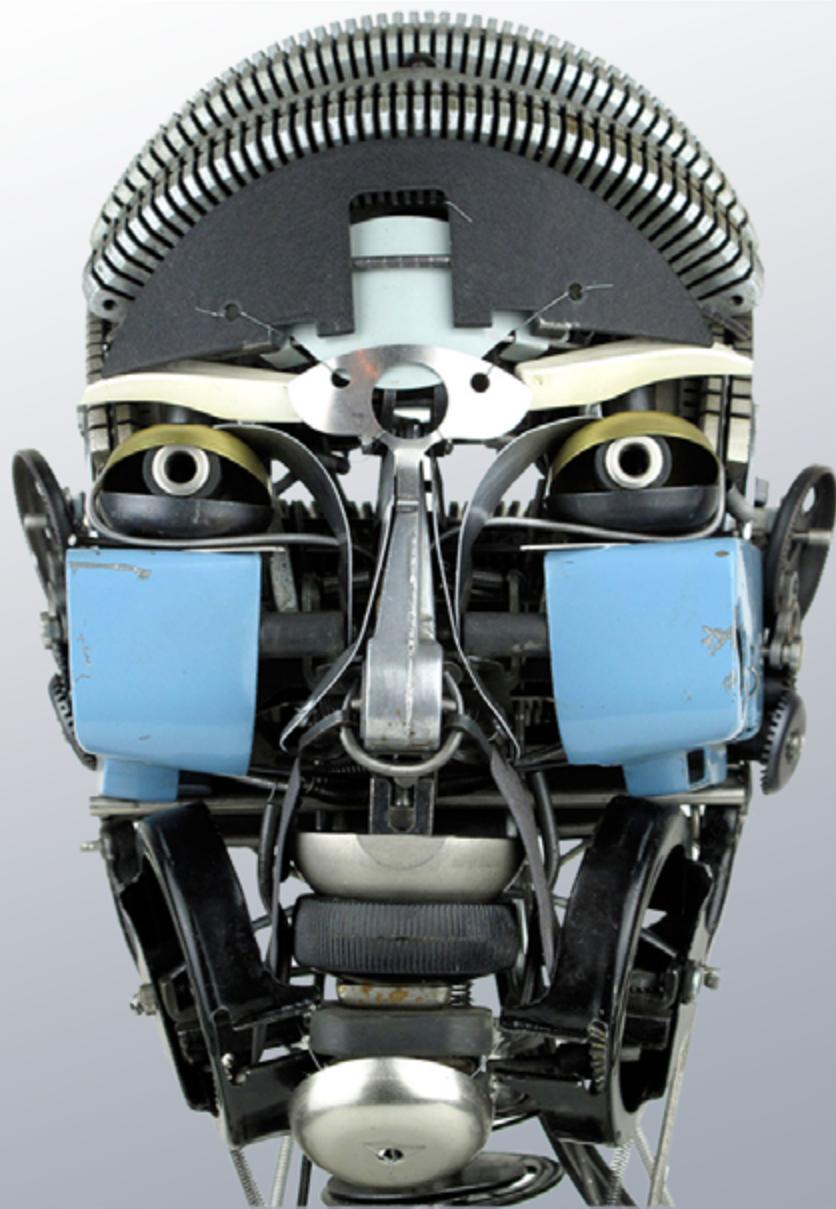


BORG LIKE ME

& Other Tales of Art, Eros and Embedded Systems



GARETH BRANWYN

This PDF is a sampler of my forthcoming book, *Borg Like Me (& Other Tales of Art, Eros, and Embedded Systems)*, that I'm currently crowdfunding on Kickstarter. The book is a collection of work spanning 30+ years. It includes already published material (from magazines such as *BOING BOING*, *Wired*, *Mondo 2000*, *MAKE*, as well as from my own books, websites, and special publications), unpublished pieces I've written over the years, and entirely new material written especially for this volume.

The three pieces included here should give you some idea of the range to be found in the full collection. I've also included a teaser table of contents which describes a selection of articles from the book. The final book will be around 250 pages and will be available in paperback and ebook formats. If we reach one of our higher stretch goals, I will also produce a hardbound version (with a dust jacket).

If you like this sampler, please support my Kickstarter campaign and give me your feedback in the comments section of my project page. I'm excited about this book, not only because I finally get to put this content together, but because I'm hoping to collaborate with some of the artists I've worked with over the years to illustrate it. And I want to involve my backers as much as possible in the process of putting it together. I'll be doing regular blog-like updates throughout the month on my KS project page. These will not only include info about the campaign, and new pledge rewards, but will also contain content (photos, stories, and other material related to my life and writing) that won't be in the book, or appear anywhere else. I'll also be asking for backer input at times. I want this project to have a collaborative element to it and I'm looking forward to seeing where that aspect of the project takes us. I hope you'll hop on for the ride!

Visit my Kickstarter campaign here: kck.st/110ylj0

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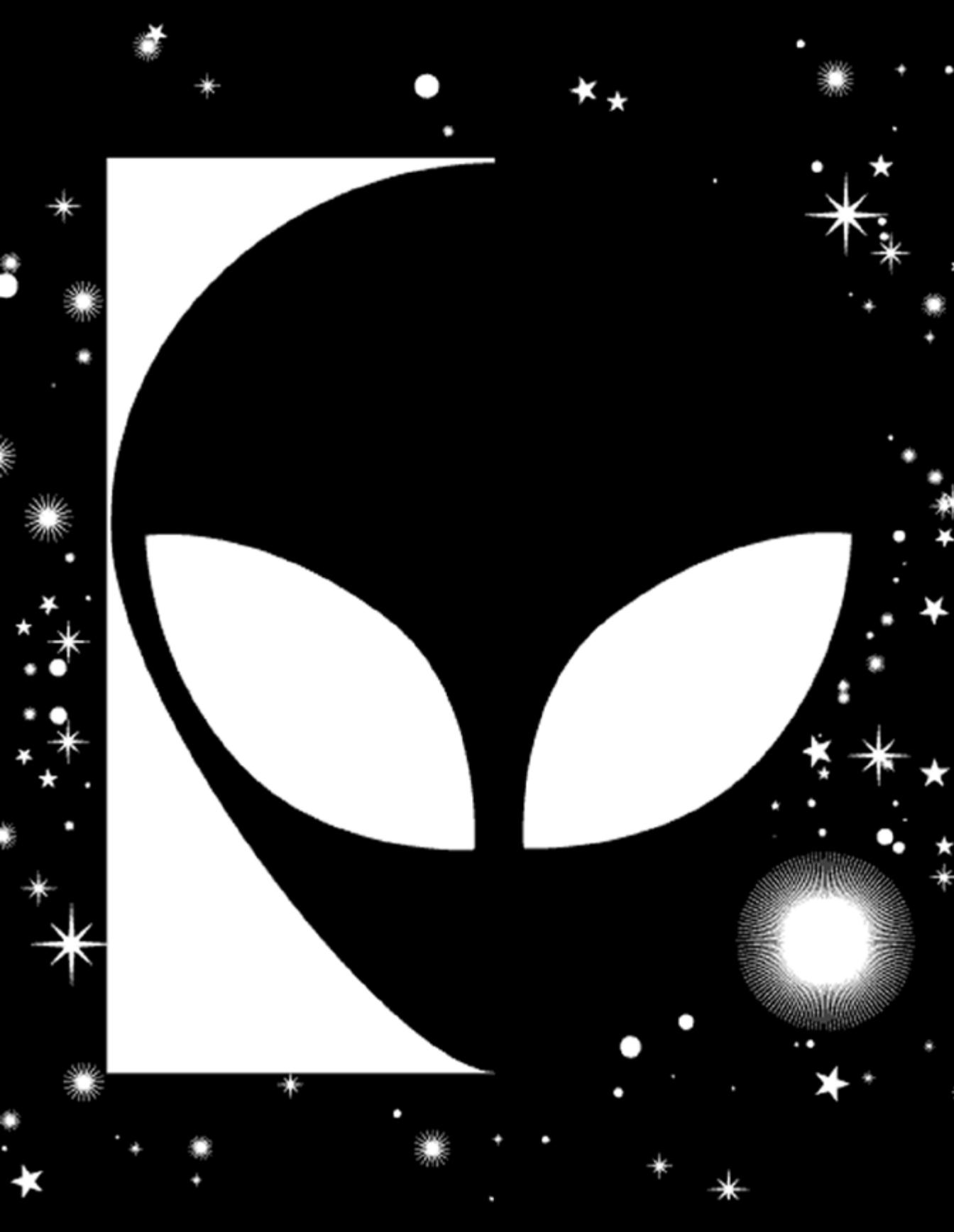
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Gareth’s Tips on Sucks-Less Writing - In the early days of Web 2.0, I post a good-writing tips sheet for new bloggers and it ends up being taught in college creative writing courses. Tres new media! Here updated for the 21st century.



CHAPTER ZERO: THE LAUNCH PARTY

I originally wrote this piece as the opening chapter for my memoirs. People kept saying that I told great stories, have had interesting, often hilarious, life experiences, and should be writing everything down. So, in the late 80s, I began doing just that.

Calling this "Chapter Zero" is perhaps an overly cruel assessment of my childhood. I didn't think that I had much to say about my life experience before I left the small Southern Baptist town of Chester, VA (at least that I couldn't fold into successive chapters). Somehow, summarizing that childhood by writing a pre-chapter about the night before I left town seemed like the right note to sound, albeit a harsh one. I worked on successive chapters on and off for a few years before running out of enthusiasm for the project. Maybe one day I'll return to it.

In 1993, when I saw Richard Linklater's Dazed and Confused, it spooked me by how much that movie was my senior year of high school. I graduated in 1975 (skipping the 11th grade); the movie takes place in 1976. Several of the male characters wear exact shirts, pants, and a belt that I owned. The way they talked, the music they listened to, the crusin' and the boozin' – it was all painfully familiar. The movie became seriously unnerving when they also drive to a hilltop overlooking the town to party after graduation, as my own story recounts here. In truth, the "hill outside of town, the highest point in Chester" that I describe was more of a hump than a hill and its attraction was not a commanding view of our little hick town, but rather its seclusion and dramatic view of the sky (which is how it had gotten its reputation as a place to spot comets and UFOs – which somehow became eminently easier once we were all stoned).

I posted this piece on garethbranwyn.com years ago but only ever shared the link with friends. This is the first time it's being published. Apologies to Carl and Weston (not their real names). Gareth wasn't my name at this point either, so we're all even.

We have our heads poked into the Milky Way. Carl, Weston, and I have parked on the hill outside of town, the highest point in Chester -- yeah, that's right - Chester, Virginia, my home, at least for the next few hours. The hill, part of a tract of farmland long exhausted by ignorance and need, looks out over part of the town -- mostly it looks into the sky. Sitting on the hood of Weston's forest green Galaxie 500, the night sky dominates. It's a surprisingly cool and still late spring night. The stars are in brilliant focus, the planets winking hints of color, the spiral arm of our parking spot in the Milky Way, a spew of soft dust overhead. Billions of immense nuclear furnaces, reduced to mood lighting at this distance. It's a magical night, the perfect setting for a grand exit. Mine.

Weston has rummaged around beneath the front seat and produced a black vinyl zippered case. As he unzips it, Deep Purple's "Made in Japan" blares from the open doors of the car. Please, not "Smoke on the Water" again! I've lost track of how many times we've heard that fucking song tonight. Let's see: it was playing when Weston and Carl picked me up, it was playing as we ate our Friday night chickens (every Friday, we go to the Safeway and each get a deli-cooked chicken), it was probably playing while we waited for over an hour at Skaggies Grocery before convincing some redneck to buy us an 8-pack of Miller. Ian Gillan's high-pitched wail on "Child in Time" reminds me that "Smoke" will soon be here again.

Inside Weston's zipper case is our coveted instrument of self-destruction: the SuperToker. Not the proletarian Toker, not the gimmicky Mini-Toker, this is the pinnacle of stoner technology: the SuperToker. Strapped down to the inside walls of the case, the SuperToker (and its various tools and accessories) looks like a piece of serious labware, something to load up with the raw materials of the primordial ooze and zap them with jolts of electricity in an attempt to trigger primitive life. We're loading it up with something far less grandiose (but no less primordial): round-town brown, the only weed that ever seems to blow toward Chester.

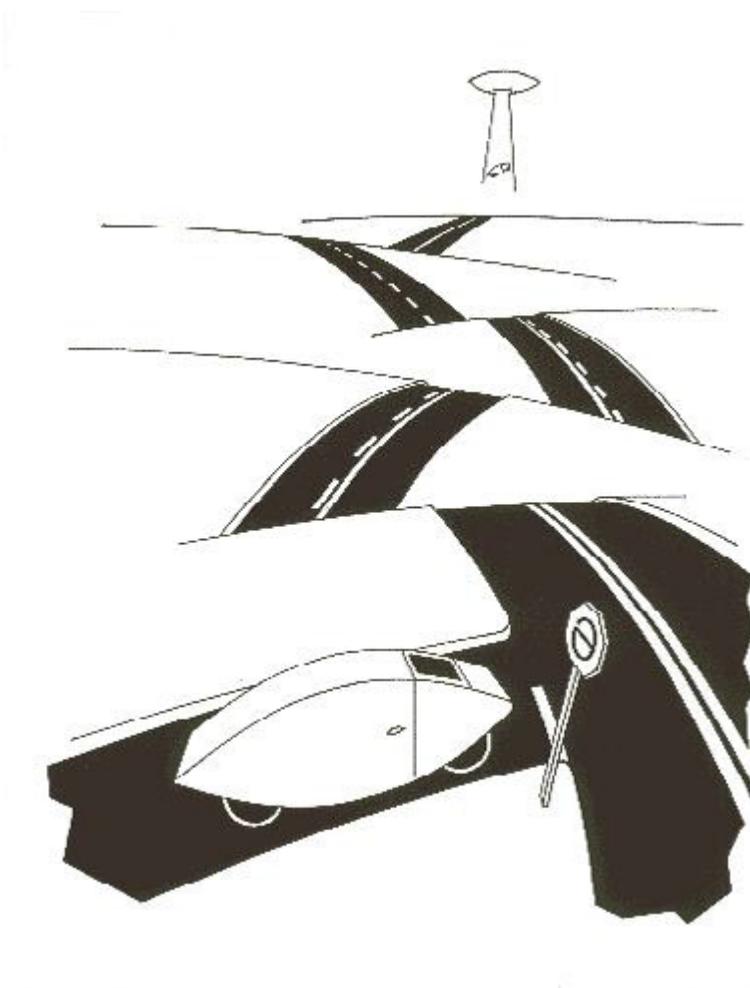
"Smoke on the water, fire in the sky..." As Deep Purple recounts for the umpteenth time tonight what happened when they were in Montreux (something about a flare gun, Frank Zappa, and a big-ass fire is all I've ever gotten from intense scrutiny of this song), we smoke-ring our own fire into the sky.

I'm afraid. I'm filled with hope and anticipation. Over the UFOs. Other friends claim they've seen them out here at the edge of town. It's that kind of night tonight where you half expect a whispery silver craft to glide out over the tree line and tattoo your face with radiation you can show off to the local news team as evidence of the encounter. I want a visitation, an abduction. I *need* an abduction, a dramatic escape. If almond-headed, fetal aliens don't do it, my parents will, tomorrow morning, in that embarrassing Nile barge they drive, the powder blue Buick Electra. Carl and Weston know I'm leaving tomorrow morning (my parents are driving me to a commune I want to visit), but they have no idea to what extent they've acted as propellant, or how far I hope the fuel I've stored up will carry me. If all goes according to plan, I will never see this town nor Weston and Carl again (it does and I don't). It's a disappearing act I've been rehearsing for years. In the top drawer of my desk at home are calendars for the last year and a half. Every day of every week of every month has a big "X" stabbed into it. Every night that I carve that "X," a little piece of this town and these people wink out of existence. I went ahead and "X"ed out today before I left. In my mind, I'm already gone, this night already a fading memory.

I've read too many books on UFOs -- every one in the tiny Chester library. I've vividly imagined the encounters as I've read them: the scorched earth, the missing time, the cosmic sunburns. Some nights, I wake from sleep, with dreams overlaying reality. I swear that I can see those penetrating alien eyes and bulbous gray heads outside my window. I'm often afraid to open my curtains, sure that I'll find an unearthly presence staring back at me. Sitting on Weston's hood, constantly gurgling away at the water pipe to keep the round-town brown psychoactive, I realize that *I'm* the fetal alien. I'm the monster I don't want to face in the black glass of the bedroom window. I've never been a part of this place or these people. It's not that I don't like Weston and Carl. We've spent most of our time together since elementary school. It's just that I've never felt like we were members of the same species, let alone the same community. Our friendship has been a placeholder for something not yet available to me, a convenience born of proximity. I've been a drag-friend, someone who does a pretty good job of dressing up and play-acting friend, but it's all surface. The really sad thing is that they've never noticed because surface appears to be all they have. They don't go any deeper than cruising and smoking and drinking and trying their best to get laid (which they're miserable at). Naive or not, I think I'm onto something, that I've been in training for a mission, a mission to save myself and to help rid the world of ignorance and mediocrity. That mission begins in a few hours. The constant ignition and ingestion of low-grade marijuana shake is giving me a headache and second thoughts

about my pending embarkation. I'm dreading the trip with my parents, I'm dreading the tedium of leaving. The option of UFO abduction seems much more desirable at this point. But they'd want to take Weston and Carl, too. How could I convince my spindly space buddies that I'm the only one they want to suck up into their big silver seed and silently zip off with, leaving these two hayseeds with nothing but an unbelievably tall tale that no one in Chester will buy? I think of those redneck fishermen in the south who claimed in one of my library books that they were taken up into a spacecraft and returned. Maybe they had a misfit buddy too, with delusions of grandeur, who convinced his space bros to take him and him alone, leaving the other guys to shit their overalls back in the bass boat.

"Gareth? Gareth!" Weston is rousing me from my staring contest with the high heavens. "Let's go. I need to start the car before we drain the batteries." As I stuff myself into the backseat and we test the mettle of Weston's shock absorbers on the hard clodded earth of the field, "Space Trucking" rumbles from the Galaxie's speakers. The timing is not lost on me as we speed into the darkness of that pitch-black back road. I crane my head into the rear window in one last vain hope that we're being tailed from above and I won't be forced to take the long road on my journey. The Milky Way offers up nothing but silence, and inexhaustible distance.



[Schwa art by William Barker]

A blue-tinted photograph of a prosthetic hip joint and a femur. The hip joint is in the foreground, showing a metal head and neck. The femur is visible in the background, extending upwards. The background is a dark blue, textured surface.

When visions of cyborgs danced in Gareth's head, he never dreamed he'd end up host to an implant straight out of a cyberpunk novel.

BORG LIKE ME

Since the age of thirteen, I've had a disease I still can't spell (and I'm determined to keep it that way). Google tells me it's "Ankylosing Spondylitis." It's basically spinal arthritis, but it affects all of the major joints in my body. It arrived alongside puberty and has been my "dark passenger" ever since. Atypical to this form of arthritis, it started in my toes and knees and then worked its way towards my spine, taking up residence in my hips in my early 20s. By my 30s, I was told I was "ready" for a right hip replacement. Degeneratively speaking, I might have been ready, but psychologically and emotionally, not so much. Fear of the procedure and possible complications made me put off the operation far longer than I should have. I ended up spending several years using what my wife and I took to calling my chair on wheels (rather than wheelchair). I wasn't confined to it, but had to take it with me wherever I went because I couldn't stand for more than 20 minutes. Frequently, I'd push around my own empty seat until I needed it. In early 2000, I could no longer cover from the inevitable. I still vividly remember that beautiful spring morning, driving to the hospital for the operation, crack of dawn, watching my house fade away in the sideview mirror, wondering if I'd ever see it and my beloved family again. Needless to say, I made it back, and I was faster, better, rebuilt. They had the technology.

This piece was originally written for the February 2001 issue of ArtByte magazine, a sadly short-lived New York digital arts and culture magazine, edited by Mark Dery at the time. The article was surprisingly well-received. I rarely get congratulatory phone calls when I publish anything. This one inspired several. The best one was from cyberpunk sci-fi pioneer Bruce Sterling. He was particularly tickled by the piece because he saw in it the beginnings of a trend: aging cyberpunks beginning to be borged for real. "Chairman Bruce" (as he was called in the cyberpunk twilight of the 20th century) loves irony, and as you'll see, this experience had no shortage of it.

It's fun to read this now and find references to NYPD Blue, the Sony AIBO, and a more innocent (pre-9/11) era when an artificial hip did not set off airport metal detectors. Today, I have a full performance of security theater to look forward to every time I travel, complete with invasive crotch groping. We live in strange times, a "cyber" future that even astute speculative fiction writers like Sterling could scarcely have imagined.

Like *Wired* after its sale to Conde Nast, I am now officially "post-hip." Last year, after decades of trying to shake off the pain of severe degenerative arthritis in my right hip (and nearly every other major joint in my body), I had a total hip replacement ("THR" in the trade). With months of Steve Austin/Six Million Dollar Man jokes under my belt, and after enduring such forehead-slapping questions as: "Will you set off metal detectors?" and "Is the Sony AIBO going to hump your bionic leg?," I was suitably hardened for anything the operating room might decide to throw at me.

Over half a million people have major joint replacements every year, but my visit with the bone saw had special poignancy. Since the early '90s, I've frequently written about neural prosthetics, plastic muscles, foreskin farming and other state-of-the-art cyborg technologies. I've also participated (online and in print) in nosebleed postmodern theorizing about our "cyborged" bodies and the growing border war between meat and machine. In the introduction to *Beyond Cyberpunk*, the 1991 hypermedia book I co-created, I wrote: "Our tech is getting smaller and smaller and soon it will disappear inside of us." Somehow, I managed to overlook the fact that this "disappearance" was already a reality for many, and little did I know that I would soon be host to some incredible shrinking tech of my own.

I'm here to tell you that fantasizing and rhapsodizing about it are worlds away from having a hunk of metal and plastic literally hammered into your own body (and having a major part of you hacked away with power tools to make room for it).

As my wife and I made the final, nerve-wracking decision to go through with the surgery, I started to feel like one of those liberal D.A.s on *NYPD Blue* who's just discovered that the baby raper he helped exonerate has moved into his own apartment building. I was now going to become a real cyborg - not one of the metaphoric borgs academics have discussed to death, a *softwired* creature of computer interfacing, gender dysphoria, and postmodern mythology, but a *hardwired* one, a literal borg: part man, part machine - a biomechanical being. The very thought of it - the risks involved, the cold, hard fact of putting my hardware where my hip once was -- scared the stuffing out of me.

Hip replacement surgery has become surprisingly safe and commonplace, but because arthritis has fused my sternum (constricting my chest), and thanks to the fistful of immuno-suppressant drugs I gobble down daily, I am at a higher risk for post-surgical pneumonia, a complication that could kill me. I am also predisposed to something called "heterotopic ossification," a horrifying side effect, where pieces of bone begin to form in the muscle around the implant, which can cause as much or more pain and limitation than the excised hip. Browsing books on hip surgery and doing online research on the subject only cranked up my fears to "11."

But then I got to fondle the hardware. During the initial visit with my orthopedic surgeon, he brought in an implant for me to play with. It was a gorgeous, awe-inspiring piece of modern machinery - almost Zen-like in its shining simplicity and austere precision. The cementless implant technology my doctor's clinic uses was co-developed by them and has been implanted into thousands of patients. The description of it reads like something from a William Gibson novel. I now sport a Duraloc® 100 acetabular titanium cup with sintered titanium beads for in-bone growth adhesion. I have a bleeding-edge Marathon® polyethylene liner with irradiated cross-linked polymers for tighter bonding and longer wear rates. My Prodigy® brand stem has a 28mm cobalt-chrome head and a cobalt-chrome femoral component with sintered cobalt-chrome beading for bone in-growth fixation. Where 2001's HAL 9000 was fond of telling people that he was made at the H.A.L. plant in Urbana, Illinois, I can now boast that part of me was manufactured by DePuy Industries of Warsaw, Indiana.

Geeking out with the doctor, discussing the details of the hardware while absent-mindedly gliding the sensuously smooth cobalt-chrome ball around inside the polyethylene cup, I felt a growing reassurance. The doctor, a third-generation member of an orthopedic dynasty (with books on Amazon!, I comforted myself); the world-renowned clinic; the smart-looking hardware -- it all started to hum like well-oiled machinery, machinery to which I found myself increasingly willing to submit. In the midst of my newfound courage and enthusiasm, I looked over at my wife and realized, by the green cast to her cheeks, that the she was more in need of smelling salts than tech specs.

As if to drive home the irony of my situation with all the subtlety of an operating room bone hammer, I had to endure several unpleasant procedures other patients usually get to skip. Because of my higher risk of mutated bone growth, I had to have my hip irradiated the morning of the surgery. There I was, at 8am (closer to my bed-

time than my morning), strapped to a slab, having my thigh sketched on with markers by a team of X-ray techs. Then, the slab started moving upward and I was raised into a room-sized X-ray machine in a scene unsettlingly reminiscent of *Bride of Frankenstein*. Once inside this giant, Soviet-looking contraption, I was asked to remain stock-still, while the machine creaked and twisted around me. Along the rim, in an obviously feeble attempt to entertain the children unfortunate enough have to endure this frightening device, marched a parade of little worn cartoon stickers of *The Jetsons*, featuring everyone's favorite mechanical domestic, Rosie. The semiological significance of this gave me something to bite down on as the flesh around my femur received a full-on assault of gamma radiation.

I also had to brave the terrifying experience of being intubated while I was still awake. Most patients can have their head tilted back to establish an airway while they're doped beyond memory. Because of my fused-forward neck, I had to be semi-awake while they shoved tubes into my throat and my body tried to heave them up. I have the most bizarre alien abduction-like memories of masked and hooded technicians frantically struggling to overcome my gag reflexes. They also wanted me to be awake in the recovery room before they removed the air tube. This felt a little bit like drowning, which mercifully, lasted for only a few seconds.

In Donna Haraway's landmark 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," she suggested that severely handicapped people often have the most heightened understanding of their relationship with technological augmentation. Being handicapped, I can vouch for the truth of Haraway's statement - in spades. Recovering in the hospital, I discovered a huge cyborged population she had apparently overlooked: the elderly. The average age of a joint replacement patient is 63. At 42, I was the ward's resident whippersnapper. Sitting in our wheelchairs, our patient-controlled morphine pumps clicking away, our catheters sluicing liquid into alarmingly-full urine bags (they don't empty those things nearly enough), I was stunned to hear all of my fellow implantees' war stories. Most everyone on the ward was on a second, third, or fourth replacement. One patient was on her sixth implant (two shoulders, two hips, and two knees). She's eighty and has made plans to live past a hundred, so she takes all of the risk, pain, and rehabilitation in stride. For her, it's a worthwhile investment to buy a few more decades of life. My hospital roommate, in his 70s, had basically stopped off for a knee replacement before he and his wife took a trip around the world. Both of them had been plagued with recent health problems (quadruple bypass surgery, ovarian cancer, arthritis). "I'm just here for a little tune-up before we hit the road," he joked.

The procedure was not fun, the hospital stay was filled with frustrations I won't enumerate here, and the six-week recovery period was one of the biggest challenges of my life. But make no mistake about it, this is miraculous technology that it is radically changing my life. A giant throbbing knot of pain is gone from my body. I was reduced to a walker when I went into the hospital, now I don't even bother with a cane. I have more energy and enthusiasm than Richard Simmons at a fat farm dance class. I had a major joint replaced and was out of the hospital faster than it takes to get over a head cold. Good thing too because there's likely more joint hacking in my future. My left hip is also circling the drain and will probably come out in the next few years. My knees are nearly shot and my shoulders are fused so I can't raise my arms above my head. Each one of these replacement procedures will augment me and amputate me at the same time (to borrow a theme from Marshall McLuhan). And what of upgrades and repairs? I may have to go back for some of those, too.

I woke up this morning with a painful limp, in my new leg. This is not supposed to happen and it made me flush with fear. It's probably nothing, muscles and tissue still trying to recover from the surgical trauma, but what if it's more? What if it's heterotopic ossification, my leg mutating into some Cronenbergian horror with bone growing where it's not supposed to? What if it's an infection in the wound site (it's possible that something as common as the flu or a teeth cleaning can lead to site infection, and in worse cases, removal of the implant). These fears, these suspicions of an alien presence in my body, will be with me for the rest of my life, and will only be compounded by each new biological-to-mechanical parts swap.

What I've learned from all this is that the subjective process of becoming a cyborg, in the *hardwired* sense, greatly suppresses one's appetite for high-minded theorizing about it. Where "wounds are openings to possibilities," as the French technocultural critic Jean Baudrillard once suggested, they are equally openings to infection. There's nothing like having a stinging, aching, seven-inch scar running down your thigh and a large foreign object lodged inside of it, slugging it out with your body's defense mechanisms, to make you appreciate the complicated trade-offs and mixed emotions involved in real-life bio-mechanical bonding. It is as much a world of wound management, site infection, tissue mutation, implant extraction and rejection, and reams of HMO paperwork, as it is a world of life-restoring body repair and trendy cyberpunk mythology. All rhapsodic cyborg theorists should book a date with a bone saw (or at least heed the words of those of us who have) to remind themselves that, in our cyborgian future-present, and in the end: it's all about the meat, stupid.



["Caution" badge by Jim Leftwich]

Update (posted to my website in 2004):

Over the years, I've gotten numerous emails, some from complete strangers, asking about my current "condition," and how my second hip replacement went. I really appreciate the interest and concern. I love you, too. I thought I'd go ahead and update people on how it's been going.

I got this total hip replacement in the spring of 2000. Even months after the surgery, my remaining hip (or my "bio hip" as I started to call it) was still in lots of pain, as was my back, my neck, and other joints. Gradually though, as the artificial hip started to make itself at home, the pain in my bio hip and back went away. I guess it was a compensatory sort of thing. I was putting all sorts of strains and exceptional stresses on other muscles and joints to compensate for the bum hip, and after it was replaced, gradually, those pains faded away. I'd also started on a new drug therapy a year or so before the surgery, and the combination of the two has been nothing short of miraculous. I now have no pain to speak of in any part of my body except my neck (and my right wrist, but that's more likely a writer's injury than an arthritic's).

I'm actually in the best shape I've been in decades. The increased physicality has allowed me to lose a lot of weight, build muscle, and leap tall buildings in a single bound. I don't use a cane anymore, or any other gimp tech. I can even fit into clothes I wore when I was in my '20s [Cue pictures of me in the mirror marveling at myself

in 80s parachute pants -- wait, scratch that. I think the 80s wardrobe is best left to the moths in the attic.]

So, in answer to your questions: I'm doing amazingly well, and at this point, I don't need the second hip replacement, or any other replacement. I'd take a new neck if they had one handy, but medical technology is not there yet.

BTW: I actually did get some of that creepy heterotopic ossification, but thankfully, it's an extremely small patch and it has never bothered me.

If anyone reading this has a bad hip and is contemplating a replacement, I say: GO FOR IT!!!! In the article, I really focused on the negative aspects of the process, 1) because the fear and discomfort of the whole experience were still fresh, and 2), the point of the piece was to contrast my years of cheerleading cyborg technologies as a cyberculture writer with the very real and direct impact of tying on a backless hospital gown and facing the upgrades myself. Four years later, with the perspective of distance and of living with the successful results, I'm here to tell you, it could have been two or three times more painful, challenging, and intense, and it still would've been worth it.

ASIDE: Do Cyborgs Dream of Bionic Upgrades? Yes they do! I get a bi-monthly newsletter, appropriately called "The Joint Journal," from my orthopedic clinic. In it, they're always showing off the latest hardware and discussing new research findings, and new less invasive surgical procedures. Like ogling the latest Dual G5 Macs, I find myself wistfully thinking: "Damn, I wish I had one of those new Biomet M2a metal-on-metal jobbies! You lucky bastards, implanting metal in the 21st century!"

**Everything I know about
writing, I swiped from
other writers and editors**



[Spider Jerusalem, on the job]

GARETH'S TIPS ON SUCKS-LESS WRITING

*I first started working on this piece in 1997 but didn't actually post it online until 1999. I'd just released my book *Jamming the Media*, a guide to all forms of 90s DIY media, when I started brainstorming a list of writing tips. By 1999, blogs (followed by podcasting a few years later) were offering a degree of easy and ubiquitous DIY media-making I hadn't foreseen just two years earlier. For all of the new media creators settling the promised land of Web 2.0 (there's content-gold in them-there hills!), I wanted to create a basic good-writing tips sheet. Over the years, I'd picked up so many great craft-of-writing ideas and hard-won words of wisdom from fellow writers, editors, and other word nerds. When I finally published the first version of this, it struck an immediate chord. It was widely linked to, covered on Boing Boing and some popular writing sites. It also ended up being taught in several college creative writing classes. One of those classes even created an early blog to talk about the class, my "sucks-less" tips, and for students to share their own tips. My favorite comment on that blog came from a student who said (about me): "He sounds really young. And cynical." I liked the "young" part. Reading over this now, I do sound a bit "contracted," as my friend Peter likes to say. I was reading a lot of Warren Ellis' *Transmetropolitan* comic at the time, so I was perhaps feeling the gonzo exuberance from that. I even ended the piece with a paraphrase from Spider Jerusalem, *Transmet*'s butt-kicking journalist, followed by a picture of him filing a story from the seat of a public commode while screaming at his editor on a cell phone. It's actually a photo of a collectable statue. A copy of that glorious statue sits on a shelf in my library, perpetually pooping and yelling and filing stories. There may be another writing tip or two in there.*

Note: I violate some of my own "rules" here. Some of the tips may seem redundant, but I decided that, in this context, it was OK. For instance: "Garage Band Writing Style," "Shitty First Drafts," "For God's Sake, Have Fun!," and "Writers Write!" are all in a similar vein, only expressed in slightly different ways. One may speak to you where another doesn't.

I've always thought that it's important to honor one's teachers. Good teachers impart the knowledge and practical wisdom that makes a difference in the way we work, live our lives, and more fundamentally, the way we perceive the world around us. They inspire us. Unfortunately, at least in my case, I'm not talking about teachers from my formal education (with a few exceptions). Over the years, it's been those foot-slogging the muddy trenches with me -- fellow editors and writers -- who've taught me the most about the writer's craft. When I look at my work, I can see them lurking within it. Whatever success I've had as a writer, I owe a great deal to them. So without further ado...

Some Lessons Learned:

■ Split Your Writer and Editor Heads

The first book I ever bought about writing was called *Writing with Power*. It was largely forgettable and it engendered in me a life-long suspicion of how-to-write guides, which BTW, seem to permanently appear on “What to get writer boy?” holiday gift lists.

Note to family and friends: I'm good on the how-to write books. If I haven't figured it out by now... Oh, and go ahead and hold off on more blank journals, too. I now have a small library of them, a small, blank library. And, as much as I'd like to think otherwise, I don't have that many profound thoughts, and when I do, I have plenty of paper, thanks to my blank library. Need gift suggestions? Liquor is always good. Writers love to drink

But I digress. *Writing with Power* wasn't a complete waste of lunch money -- it contained one core concept that changed my early life as a writer: When writing, don't try to edit yourself as you go. Say what you want to say, unencumbered by the constant commentary from that fussy editor floating around in your head. First: just get it all down. Then, you can have at it. Keep what works; bug-zap the rest. By separating writing and editing functions, you can convince yourself that you're just doing a first draft. This way, you often end up with better-than-expected material. When I read this book, personal computers weren't even a gleam in Turtleneck Steve and Mr. Bill's eyes (yes, I'm THAT old. Shush!). Way back then, it was difficult to type and retype multiple drafts without the burning desire to edit as you went. Word processing suddenly changed all that.

This memo just in from the Profound Thought Department: *Mondo 2000* was the first magazine I worked for where the entire writing process had become electronic. For my first writing job, as a columnist for *Communities* magazine, I'd write on a legal pad and then type up the final version (or several drafts and a final). As the Computer Sciences Editor for *The Futurist*, I would write my articles on my trusty Apple IIe, print them out, and then get on the DC Metro and travel from Arlington, VA to Bethesda, MD to physically deliver my manuscript. With *Mondo*, I would pitch the editors via email, write the piece on my computer, and email them the article. It was while proudly looking at my first printed piece in the magazine that it hit me: The characters I was looking at, printed there in full color, on slick paper amongst the cyberdelic swirls of that pioneering techno-culture mag, were the very ones I'd first committed to bits. I had started with my brainstorm, my “shitty first draft” (see below), and cut/pasted/added until I was satisfied. Then I'd fired off that email, which got packetized and datagrammed and sent down dozens of pipes, finally arriving across the country in San Francisco. Editors had further tweaked my keystrokes and sent them on to the art department, who'd laid them out in a graphics program and finally sent them to the printer to be shot onto printing plates. Looking at the magazine, I was looking at the very characters that had come out of my head, through my nervous system into my keystrokes and onto my screen. Such a far cry from the pre-digital world of scratching your ideas into paper, hammering them into more paper, usually multiple times, sending them to a typesetter, having them re-keyed again, cut into plates, etc. Today, they don't even manually photograph and process metal printing plates. It's all done digitally within the press itself. This combination of fluidity allowed by “word processing” frees you up to really write from the hip, and the irony is that, what comes out is often better, thanks to this degree of freedom. It's also almost directly what ends up up on the printed page. Nearly every time I look at a piece of my writing in a magazine, I feel the legacy of those characters on the page. And, of course, in digital publishing that distance is even closer. From my nervous system to yours.

■ Throw Out the First Waffle

One of the things I noticed when I first started getting my work published was how often my introductory paragraphs got unceremoniously zapped to the trash by delete-happy editors. I once heard the phrase “throwing out the first waffle” used to describe divorce from a first marriage. I’ve come to think of these intro paragraphs as the first waffle(s) of writing. Writers, especially newbies, often waste this first paragraph (or two or three) dancing around their subject, gobbling up precious page real estate, awkwardly warming themselves and their readers up. When you’re done with your initial draft, take a hard, dispassionate look at those first few paragraphs. See if you can toss them out. Be harsh. Which brings us to:

■ Applying Occam’s Razor

A friend of mine, Andrew Lawler, a science and technology writer who was an editor at *The Futurist*, *Science*, and *Space Business News*, taught me this one. When it’s time to switch from your writer’s hat to your editor’s chapeau, carefully scrutinize every word. Ask yourself: is this necessary? Is this the simplest, most straightforward way I can say this? If not, toss or revise! You’ll be amazed at how many words you can trash. (Then sit on the piece overnight – no, not literally! The next day, whip out that happy, happy razor again. You’ll be surprised how many more fat (and not so sassy) words you’ll find blinking away at you, sucking up perfectly good electrons and laptop battery life).

And now a word about sitting on your work: I cannot stress how much your piece will improve if you can let it marinate for a good 24 hours OR MORE. You need some distance from the work, perspective. The longer you can wait, the more perspective you’ll gain. Stephen King, when he finishes a book, he puts it in a drawer (and IMMEDIATELY starts in on the next book – but he’s inhuman). He waits at least two weeks before he starts in on editing – and knowing to split writer and editor heads, he’s done NO going back and reading/editing the manuscript while he was writing it. Two weeks is a luxury for most writers, but the worst thing you can do is to take up all of the time to the deadline writing and then quickly editing and then sending off (or publishing) your work. When you read it (now published or sent to the publisher) in a few days/weeks, you’ll hate yourself for all of the glaring mistakes, clunky word choices, too-late ah-ha moments, etc. So, do yourself a favor, leave time to sit on it!

Critical note to newbies: Never, EVER find yourself saying the following in email to an editor: “I know you only asked for [your assigned word count goes here], but here’s [your outrageously flabby, up all night buzzing your brains out on caffeine till you’ve lost all restraint and perspective word count goes here].” Editors are busy, over-worked people, surly, Type-A personalities, with little patience for sloppy, logorrheic writing. Getting the piece at least in the neighborhood of the assigned word count is your job, not theirs. If they have to spend a lot of time wrestling your piece into the allotted space, you may not get the gig next time.

■ Don’t be Redundant. Really. Don’t.

Sometimes, you learn what not to do by watching others. I have a friend (who’ll remain nameless) who’s a supremely funny and talented writer, but he often slips into repeating himself. He constantly repeats concepts and sentence wording. When you constantly repeat concepts and sentence wording, you end up writing about 50% too much material, just like my funny and talented writer friend does. I’ve learned my lesson well from him, not to repeat concepts and sentences endlessly. He’s really funny and talented though. He really is.

More on this: I often find, when editing writers, that they'll use the same word over and over again in successive sentences. So, if they're writing about a 3D printer they'll use "3D printer" in every instance. A good writer can come up with creative ways to avoid over-using the primary proper noun. So a 3D printer can be simply "the printer," or "the desktop fabricator," "the baby Star Trek Replicator," "the glorified computer-controlled glue gun," whatever. I'm being silly here, but you get the idea. Free your mind. Have fun.

■ **Damn the Cliches!**

Many, many years ago, I contributed to a book for Time-Warner. My editor was big on cliché busting. I'd never realized how many clichés I relied upon until she pointed them all out. So, in order to weed out those moldy chestnuts, keep your eyes peeled and your ear to the ground. Then, your work will be as fit as a fiddle and fresh as a daisy.

■ **Read it Out Loud**

The late William Safire suggested that you read your work out loud. Writing is not the same as speaking, but they each have (when done well) a lot to do with rhythm and a satisfying word flow. If your writing sounds good when spoken, it's likely to read well on the page. It's definitely a good idea to read all dialogue out loud, especially if you're new to writing it or struggle with getting voice right. Aloud, you'll find all sorts of words, sentence choices, and rhythms that just aren't natural to speaking.

Tangential to this: Brian Eno says that he has certain people he sometimes imagines looking over his shoulder, hearing his music, reading his words, a kind of virtual Greek chorus of different critical voices. I do this sometimes and it can be helpful. The trap is not wanting to change what you need to say because you want to please each of those voices. Do that, and your work will end up as invigorating as luke-warm bath water. Stephen King says you should designate someone you know and whom you think represents the consumers of your work, "The Reader," and you should write to that person. They don't even have to know. In his case, it's his wife, and she eventually does read the drafts, but he always keeps her in mind when he's composing and directs everything he create at her. Again, this can be a trap, but it can serve as a useful framing tool.

■ **Giving Good Headline**

Writing great heds (headlines) and deks (subheds) is an excellent way of framing the concepts of your piece and adding another level of wit and humor to your work. I hardly ever do proper outlines. I usually come up with a general concept, create the heds and deks, then hang my story from there. Which leads us to:

■ **Know How to Get In and Get Out**

A friend of my dearly-departed wife's, a TV news "crime and grime" reporter in DC, in trying to give her some advice on "patter" (what a performer says to an audience between tunes), shared a TV journalist's tip: Know how to get in (how to set up what you're going to say) and how to get out (how you plan on finishing). Then you're free to bullshit your way through the middle. If you get stuck, or run out of things to say, you can jump to your closing. The same thing holds true in writing. Once you know how to set up your piece (obviously with a great attention-seducing lede) and how to end (with an equally clever and compelling wrap up), much of the heavy lifting's already done. The rest is mainly filling in the who-what-where-when-why and providing some painterly

description of your subject.

■ “Write Like Yourself, Only More So”

This motto comes from science fiction author Rudy Rucker who has called what he writes “transrealist” fiction. He takes real situations and people from his life and exaggerates them in his novels. He believes this creates a more honest, grounded, textural fiction, even when dealing with out-of-this-world subject-matter. Even though I don’t write much fiction, this concept appeals to me since I usually write non-fiction in a personal, first-person style.

Writing in a first-person, conversational style is a mixed bag. Some people like it, others don’t. Some writers are good at it, others aren’t. If you write this way, be careful not to come off sounding condescending, or too chatty. Aim for smart, friendly, funny, unpretentious prose.

More on this: My approach to writing is based on the editorial policy of the old *Whole Earth Review*. “Write like you’re writing to an intelligent but uninformed friend.” This style may not work for, or appeal to, everyone, but it’s always worked for me.

Even more on this: If you write in a conversational style, be careful not to make it TOO conversational. Limit sentences that begin with “And,” “So,” “Well,” “OK.” Also avoid using qualifiers that wimp out your point: “In my opinion,” “I think,” “If you ask me,” etc. Other weakening qualifiers that are used in conversation, but don’t work as well in text are words like “just” (“I just think that I’ve lost all faith in my creator and in humanity.”), “pretty” (“Sex with you last night was pretty good.”) and “fairly” (“I’m fairly sure that this sentence will communicate my point.”).

■ Writers Write!

Mike Gunderloy, founding editor of the iconic zine review guide *Factsheet Five*, used to say that, even if you aren’t a writer to begin with, after cranking out a million words or so, you’re a writer! Gunderloy himself was a prime example. He wasn’t much of a writer when he started F5, his “zine of zines,” but he sure as hell was by the time he called it quits millions of words later. By then, he had truly mastered the art of short-form, concise, and spunky media criticism.

■ Writers Are Makers

Working for MAKE magazine for eight years, early into it, at events where people stood up to say what they made, I would say: “I make magazines and books about people making things.” People would laugh, but I meant it in all sincerity. Writing is a kind of making, a form of idea engineering and communication. When I edited the Lost Knowledge issue of MAKE (Volume 17), steampunk artisan Jake von Slatt (who was writing a project article for the issue) called one night, excited, because he’d realized that writing is just another form of making, designing, engineering, and constructing. Indeed. A piece of writing has structure, it needs structural integrity to hold up under its own weight. It has design, it has components that need to fit together properly, there are frequently construction problems that require troubleshooting and tinkering to get the contraption of your piece to run well. A written piece is like a little thought machine that you build and then it gets run in the reader’s mind and delivers a powerful idea (if built properly). Thoughts along these lines had dawned on Jake as he worked on his article.

■ Spelling Counts (so don't grammar)

A lot of readers out there don't give a jot how clever you are if you have the grammatical chops of Dan Quayle. Computers have been a boon to the language-impaired, thanks to spell- and grammar-checkers, but these tools can't help you if you don't use them. It astonishes me how many articles I get from writers -- allegedly pros -- who haven't bothered to spell- or grammar-check their manuscript. This is NOT the way to an editor's (or an intelligent reader's) heart.

■ Sometimes, the Best Things You Write, You Write by Mistake

Several of my most reproduced pieces came from rants I posted on The Well BBS that I had no intention of ever publishing beyond that forum (one post even became the words that opened Billy Idol's notorious 1993 Cyberpunk record!). I was posting on the fly, as part of a written conversation. Unencumbered by my "editor head," I got something out of me that I may not have otherwise. Keeping a journal of your thoughts on anything (not just the daily details of your life), or engaging in good online conversation, are great ways of learning how to write with freedom and immediacy. You'll be surprised how much turns out to be useable material.

More on this: Your next big idea may occur to you at any time, so always keep a pen and notebook handy. (I have these tools by my bed, my chair in the living room, in my basement workshop, by my toilet, in my shirt pocket, etc.) Write down what comes to you, DON'T tell yourself that you'll remember it! You won't. I've had brilliant brainstorm (at least that's what I've told myself) in the middle of the night, and being too lazy to write them down, have tried to memorize them before floating back to Slumberland. Next morning: Nada. Zippo. Not a clue (except the memory that, whatever it was, it was a zinger). Once you get in the habit, you'll automatically reach for the pad even before the thought has finished forming itself.

Even MORE on this: If getting up, turning on the light, and jotting things down is too much, or there are other situations where writing is not convenient, get a cheap digital voice recorder or a recording program for your mobile phone (if it doesn't already have one). You can also use Evernote.com, the free, Web-based note-taking program that allows you to take audio notes, texted notes, even photographed "notes." I record my dreams at night (yes, I sleep with my phone. Don't you?) and they're already uploaded to my Evernote account before my feet slide into the bunny slippers in the morning.

■ For God's Sake, Have Fun!

The awesomely talented Sean Carton taught me to loosen up and have fun with my writing. He worked with me on the *Mosaic Quick Tour* books (the first book about the Web, I'll have you know). He wrote in such a relaxed, fun, conversational style. It inspired me to relax at my keyboard, let it hang out more than it ever had. He also really loves to have fun with the reader, grab them by their shoulders and smack them around a bit (in a playful sort of way). Tapping into a cocky, humorous style, again, without condescension, has a lot to do with being relaxed while you write. That, and not caring too much about the final outcome. Which brings us to:

■ Garage Band Writing Style

Writing is something that anyone can do, and do well, IF you know how to get out of the way of yourself. And then, how to massage what comes out into something that can communicate powerfully with others. A lot of the really talented magazine writers and editors that I've worked with over the years started out in the zine publishing movement -- the writer's equivalent of punk rock. Along with "writing like yourself," and "having fun," go

ahead and toss “writing like you don’t give a shit” into your toolkit. Shoot from the hip, write from your gut, put some passion into it! Write what excites you. Don’t be afraid to break the rules or piss on statues. The results may suck, but they might not, and you might be onto something fresh and exciting. Elvis Costello was a punch card drone at Elizabeth Arden Cosmetics when he saw the Sex Pistols on TV. He thought (paraphrasing): “Fuck this. I can play better than these louts. If they can be rock stars, I can too!” There are plenty of big name writers out there, with all of the questionable talent you need for this kind of “if s/he can do it, I can too!” inspiration (I’ll resist naming names).

More on this: One of my writing teachers (and “life editors”) is Peter Sugarman (with whom I did *Beyond Cyberpunk!*, and who co-founded the website Street Tech with me). Peter and I have very different writing (and life-) styles, but the emotional power and directness with which he writes have always inspired me. He seems to have a nearly direct link between his guts and his keypad. He reads a lot of comic books and admires the poetry and economy of words inherent in them. He’s obviously been influenced by the genre and the immediacy, brevity, of his writing reflects that. I’ve tried to let this approach inform my own.

■ Develop a Thick Skin

My first professional gig was as the Computer Sciences Editor for *The Futurist*. I was nervous about the job and didn’t feel like I was getting enough pats on the back from my editor. One day, I confronted him. His answer, although something of a cop-out, did contain a valuable lesson. He said: “You’re here because we wanted the best. We hire people who are good at what they do. I expect great things from you and you deliver that.”

This was, of course, the kind of recognition I was looking for, but it also reminded me that the writing world is a fast and furious business. Editors can’t always (and rarely do) hold your hand or pat your back. Being hired, THAT’S their big vote of confidence. Editors don’t have time to respond to every email message and phone call. You have to be self-motivated, low-maintenance, and above all, thick-skinned. You’re mainly going to hear from them when they DON’T like what you’ve done. And honey, when they tell you how badly they think you screwed up, they’re not likely to mince words.

Then there are the nasty letters to the editor and the hate mail from readers. You have to suck all this up, too. Again, most likely, you’ll only hear from people who think you stink. But that only makes it sweeter when you get mail from readers who say that what you wrote changed their lives, or saved their lives, or set them down a brilliant career path, or whatever. These messages may be few and far between, but when they arrive, they make all of it (dealing with surly type-A editors, readers from hell, inadequate pay) worthwhile.

■ Editors: Give ‘Em (Part of) What They Want

One of my awesome editor friends, who should probably remain nameless (*sneeze* Frauenfelder) shared this one with me many years ago, after I’d suffered through a couple of endless rounds of “Frankenedits” on several *Wired* features. I was always under the impression that, when an editor sends back a manuscript profusely bleeding with red edit ink, you have to make every change they suggest or insist upon. Mark says “Nah.” Pick the two or three really big changes, especially the ones you agree with, make those, and then any additional suggested changes that are easy to make. Then send it back and say that the edit suggestions were really great, insightful, and you’re really happy with the piece with the new changes. Nine times out of ten, that will be it. You’re done! (Of course, telling you this might be a little bit like revealing stage magic secrets. I probably just violated some sort of writer’s Fight Club rules. Sorry, Mark, sorry fellow corner-cutting wordsmiths).

■ Watch Out for Mixed Metaphors

One of the things I've worked hard to cure myself of is the use of mixed metaphors. "Like a rock, standing arrow straight" or however that Bob Seeger ode to the Chevy pickup goes, is a prime example. Sure you can force the fit, but it's just bad writing. A rock might be tough, hard, long-lasting, but one doesn't normally associate chunks of geologic aggregate with lean, supple arrows. By the way, Bob, rocks don't really charge through gates, either.

■ Take it "Bird by Bird"

One of those writing how-to books I got as a gift, and initially shelved with many others, was Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*. Since a writer-friend I love and respect had given it to me, I figured I should at least give it a whiff (after months of feeling guilty about not doing so). The book turned out to be extremely inspirational. It's filled with hysterical stories about the craft of writing and the art of living from someone who lives an unconventional, paint-outside-the-lines life. The central premise concerns getting over your laziness about writing. As mentioned above, "writers write," but often, this only happens when they can trick themselves into doing so.

The title refers to an incident when Anne was a child. Her brother had waited until the night before a school project on birds was due to start work on it. He sat at the kitchen table, with a blank pad of paper and a pile of bird books, overcome by the immensity of his task. His father sat down, put his arm around him and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird." This has become Lamott's way of tricking herself into writing. She tells herself that she's only required to write a small amount each day, one "bird." No matter how busy, how distracted, how depressed, surely there's time for one measly paragraph or character description or scene outline? Of course, once you sit down to bang out that one small 3x5's worth of text, you end up producing two or three or more. But you always tell yourself you're gonna take it one untimidating chunk at a time. Bird by bird, buddy.

■ Shitty First Drafts

One of Lamott's other "tricks" (which we've already covered above in "Split your writer and editor heads," "Garage band writing style," and "For God's sake, have fun!") is to perfect the art of the "shitty first draft." Get over yourself and just get it out! Tell yourself it's your goal in life to craft a shitty first draft, that you LOVE your shitty first drafts, that shitty first drafts are your friends. Amaze yourself by the impressive quality and quantity of the shit you can generate. Bow to the Buddha in that shit! Nobody but you ever has to see these unsightly drafts. Lamott says her career might be over if readers saw some of hers. But it's this rough, let 'er rip copy that she's crafted into numerous and inspiring best sellers.

■ Keep it Naughty AND Nice

I also highly recommend Connie Hale's *Sin and Syntax: How to Craft Wickedly Effective Prose*. I swear my writing literally improved with each completed chapter. The book is about the balance between sin (breaking the rules, writing with courage, being fresh and creative) and syntax (knowing and applying the rules when appropriate). The book mainly reads like a post-modern *Strunk and White* and is a good reminder of what you learned (or should have learned) in school. Connie, the former Copy Chief at *Wired*, uses a fun array of real-world examples (from the Bible to press releases to rock lyrics) to illustrate bad writing that follows the rules and good writing that doesn't.

■ Tell the Truth, the World Has Too Many Liars!

This is my final tip (then I'll go away and let you get to work). Here in our sucks-more 21st century, where most journalists have become corporate spokesbots skewing the news based on what polls and focus groups tell them their "demos" are interested in hearing (and what their advertisers will support), we writers need to tell the truth, at least the truth as we understand it.

When I was a teen and dreamt of becoming a writer, I had this romantic image of writer as rebel, a L'enfant terrible who sat at a typewriter, with a pack o' smokes and a bottle o' Jack, bleeding truth onto cotton-weave. While age, familial responsibilities, and a bottom line may have worn down some of my edge, I still try to do an honest day's work, and write with as much honesty, authenticity, and passion as I can manage.

Given the current state of things, as I watch too much of our future being flushed down the craphole, I'm looking to sharpen some of that edge back. One of my inspirations? A comic book character, Spider Jerusalem. The "hero" of Warren Ellis' brilliant *Transmetropolitan* series, Spider Jerusalem, is a Hunter Thompson-esque bitraker who beats the streets of a sprawling city in an indeterminate near-future. His laptop has become a dangerous weapon in his fight against government corruption, corporate crime, and social apathy. He is journalist as superhero (albeit a very flawed, drug-addled, vigilante one). If you're a writer who (like me) needs a Doc Marten in your backside every now and then to remind you why you got into this game in the first place, read *Transmet!* I even bought myself a Spider Jerusalem action figure. Half-naked, fully tattooed, he sits on my computer, along with his assault laptop and two-headed, chain-smoking mutant kitty, keeping me honest. A lovely collectable statue of Spider (sitting on a toilet) graces the shelves of my library, too. Corny? Maybe. Childish? Probably that too, but Spider is here to remind me how I can, right now, reach through this monitor and grab you by the head, the throat, the heart, or the nethers. How? With the power of my words, 'cause in this closing sentence, I'm here to remind you that I am a fully-armed, Goddamn Professional Journalist!

Borg Like Me is a comprehensive collection of cyberculture pioneer Gareth Branwyn's best work. Spanning 30+ years, it covers everything from his youth in a hippie commune to his involvement in the 90s zine publishing scene, his tenure at influential cyber arts and culture mags Mondo 2000, bOING bOING, and Wired, and his eight years with MAKE, spearheading the growing maker movement. Previously published material is interwoven throughout with Branwyn's painfully honest commentary and personal stories, and there are also many original pieces. Read about the smart-druggies behind Mondo 2000, impersonating Billy Idol in cyberspace (for Billy Idol), interviewing Trent Reznor at the first Lollapalooza concert, and Gareth going inexplicably haywire after a bad blood transfusion. Borg Like Me is a smart, passionate, intense trip along the bleeding edges of the art, technology, and culture at the turn of the 21st century.

What Others Are Saying About Gareth Branwyn

"Gareth Branwyn — superconductor of cyberculture... a hip McLuhan of the plugged-in age."

- *Washington Post*

"Brilliant writing and impressive scholarship."

- *Toronto Globe & Mail*

"Truly inspired."

- *LA Times*

(review of *Happy Mutant Handbook*)

(review of *Absolute Beginner's Guide to Building Robots*)

"Hard to tear myself away."

- *New York Times*

(review of *Beyond Cyberpunk!*)

"Gareth Branwyn is a highly-charged counter-cultural electromagnet"

- Cyberpunk godfather and sci-fi icon

John Shirley

"...a shining example of why weird wins."

- Weird Hero Award

Laika Studios

(*Coraline*, *ParaNorman*)

"Gareth Branwyn tracks cyberculture like no one else."

- Countercultural iconoclast and
Mondo 2000 founder RU Sirius

