I've offered many examples, some of them obvious, some of them subtle. I would encourage subtlety. Nabokov's bubble gum or Munro's water over Dumbo's magic feather. The pattern doesn't have to announce itself with a bullhorn to work. As the poet knows, and as Baxter writes, "Rhymes are often most telling when they are barely heard, when they are registered but not exactly noticed. . . . I think it's often more effective if the echo effects, the rhyming action, are allowed to happen without the reader being quite aware of them."

Toy Story is just another movie. An orange is just another fruit. The corner of Eighty-Sixth and Lexington is just another intersection. A table is just a place to have dinner. Until they're tossed into the air—and with each pass through the juggler's hands they gain power and meaning.

Home Improvement
Revision as Renovation

The Realtor said, "It's got good bones." That's what people say about ugly houses—and this was an ugly house. No one had done a thing to it since 1965, the year it was built. Every inch of the place was plastered with flocked or floral-patterned wallpaper, even the insides of the cabinets. All the light fixtures were white orbs collared by thin brass rings. The outside of the oven grew as hot as the inside. The master bedroom had curtains that matched its shaggy carpet that resembled in its color nothing so much as mint-green gum. The roof was rotten and sagging. The furnace and gutters were rusted out.

But my wife and I walked through the backyard, a good quarter acre of rich grass bordered by shade plants and mature ash trees whose branches came together overhead like a cathedral's roof. And we stood before the river-rock fireplaces and sat on the three-season porch and laid our hands flat along the walls and smiled as you would when rubbing a belly ripe with pregnancy. And bought the place.

This was April of 2008, and we were shoving books into boxes, packing up the moving truck, when the phone rang with good news: I had sold my novel *The Wilding*. My editor at Graywolf Press, Fiona McCrae, said how excited she was about the manuscript, but wondered if I might be amenable to some changes. "Of course," I said. What did she have in mind? "How about let's start with the point of view?" she said. "Might we shift it from first to third? And in doing

so, with the freedom afforded to the characters, perhaps we could add some plotlines that threaded together?" The book had good bones, in other words, but it needed some renovation.

Fiona has a British accent and somehow this makes everything she says sound reasonable. So I said, "Sure, no problem"—and I meant it. I recognized the narrative as less of a novel and more of an extended short story, a "shnovel." Here was the architectural solution, a new blueprint delivered from contractor to carpenter. I felt fired-up, ready to flip open my toolbox and get to work. It wasn't until later, when I printed the manuscript and began to riffle through its pages, that I shuddered at the job ahead of me.

I'm no stranger to starting over. I wrote four failed novels before selling *The Wilding*. They were not a waste of time, not at all. I learned from them the humility that comes from watching something you've spent years working on turn to dust in your hands. And I discovered—by dissecting their cold carcasses—the many ways I might rob their organs and bones, their images and characters and settings and metaphors, and rearrange them, reimagine them, as short stories.

"Refresh, Refresh" is a good example. For my graduate thesis I wrote a (wretched) novel called *King of the Wild Frontier* (panned by students, faculty, agents, and editors alike). The fight scenes that appear in "Refresh, Refresh" are almost directly lifted from it, though their context couldn't be more different. Neither could the early and late drafts of the short story. Originally, "Refresh, Refresh" was supernatural—my agent, Katherine Fausset, helped me transform it into scorched-earth realism. Originally it was forty pages—and Nat Rich at the *Paris Review* helped me winnow it down to eighteen. Originally the grandfather played a much larger role, and his subplot involved an amputated foot preserved in a bucket of formaldehyde—he ended up getting his own story, "The Killing" (which also recycles a number of scenes from *King of the Wild Frontier*). I could go on about the axed weight-lifting scenes, the three

boys that became two, the brain-damaged vet, Floyd, who every night set up his karaoke machine outside the Dairy Queen and served as a kind of Greek chorus. Gone.

So much of revision, I've discovered, is about coming to terms with that word: *gone*. Letting things go. When revising, the beginning writer spends hours consulting the thesaurus, replacing a period with a semicolon, cutting adjectives, adding a few descriptive sentences—whereas the professional writer mercilessly lops off limbs, rips out innards like party streamers, drains away gallons of blood, and then calls down the lightning to bring the body back to life.

My editor at *Esquire*, Tyler Cabot, helped me figure this out. He once commissioned me to write a story about April 20, a cursed day on the calendar known for being, among other things, the proximate date of Hitler's birthday, the Oklahoma City bombing, the Waco siege, the Columbine shootings, the Deepwater Horizon oil disaster. He wanted me to write a story that incorporated the larger mythology and that also read like today's news, since it would hit magazine racks around that same date. I had two weeks. And for two weeks, all I did was hammer. I would shoot him a draft and he would say things like "I dig this dialogue exchange. Lose the rest," or "Not ballsy enough," or "This is kind of sucking. Start over." At one point, as we neared the deadline, he offered a kill fee—and then he called back an hour later and said, "Come on, man. You can do this. One more draft." One more draft made ten drafts. And the tenth draft sold. I wrote over one hundred pages for the thirteen that were published.

Revision doesn't come easy. That's why I used to resist it. When I received comments on my work, my eyes skimmed over the criticism and homed in on the compliments. That's no way to be. Let me tell you something: if you've got the angel in one ear, whispering kind things, and the devil in the other, hissing about how badly you stink, listen to the devil. The devil drives revision.

You've got to write every day as if you were clocking in for a job. Or if not every day, then damn near it. If you're not disciplined in your production—if you're writing only when the mood strikes or when a deadline looms—then naturally you'll be more protective of your work, so that when it comes time to cut, your saw will tremble with hesitation. But if you're producing reams of pages, you'll be less resistant to revision, because you know it won't be long before another load of timber comes down the road.

I discovered this in grad school, when writing became a full-time job and when critiques became sharp-toothed, long-nailed. One time a professor handed me back a manuscript with every single page slashed through with an enormous black *X*. There were no comments except a single word scrawled over the title: *Don't.* When I later spoke to the professor, I pushed him further, asking what he meant, exactly, by "Don't." Don't what? Don't bother? Was the story no good? No, he said. That wasn't it. He liked the story—"Just *don't* write it that way." His advice served as an eraser. I pretended the original document no longer existed, and when I began another draft, it filled up a clean white screen unchained by the rusted-out sentences written previously.

Not much has changed. Helen Atsma, my editor at Grand Central Publishing, might as well have written "Don't" when editing my novels *Red Moon* and *The Dead Lands.* Subplots and characters needed to go. The third act was confusing and unsatisfactory and needed to be completely reimagined. I used the word *growl* too often. That kind of thing. I highlighted a dozen pages here, a hundred pages there, hit DELETE, and started over.

I have thrown away thousands of pages—and sometimes you need to do that; sometimes you have to start over. But sometimes you don't. Sometimes your story needs some serious renovation—the walls are full of mold, the roof is leaking—and sometimes it simply needs some cosmetic work, a little paint splashed on the walls.

I've discovered that revision is far less intense and traumatic

when I begin a story with its end in mind. I used to be an organic writer who had no game plan, who followed my tooth-and-claw instinct, who considered writing an act of discovery. I let the garden grow and returned to it later to trim back the tangles, rip out the weeds. Dan Chaon—the author of such dynamite story collections as *Among the Missing*—is such a writer. For every fifteen-page short story he produces more than a hundred pages. His stories "Big Me" and "The Bees" went through so many drafts that "I would have probably been better off writing a novel," he says. Sometimes he lays the pages down on the floor and wanders among them, rearranging them, isolating some scenes, crumpling up others and tossing them aside, until finally he decides what the story is *about* and returns to his desk to realize the piece in a shorter form.

On the other end of the spectrum is the LEGO writer. She has her exact design in mind and snaps each piece into place and pleasures in how tidily everything comes together. I've tried this, too, and though it might work for some, for me, it makes the act of writing feel lifeless, boring.

I now fall somewhere between these two categories. I know my ending—maybe not everything about it, but generally where things will close, what will happen—and I know one or two scenes that occur in the middle. In aiming for them, I take far fewer wrong turns.

I used to consider editing something you did once a story was completed. I now begin each day by reading what I have already written. If it's a short story, I mean from the first line forward. If it's a novel, I mean from the start of the chapter I'm working on. I sometimes spend hours editing before I shift to an imaginative mode and begin to punch out new material. So I'm essentially in a constant state of revision, and by the time I finish the story, I might have edited it two dozen times, turning it over and over in my hands, sanding it until it's free of slivers.

Faulkner said, Kill your darlings, and in that tradition I created a Cemetery folder. (No doubt you are less morbid than I am, so

feel free to call yours The Compost Heap—the idea is the same.) In it I have files—tombstones, I call them—with titles like "Images" or "Metaphors" or "Characters" or "Dialogue." Into these I dump and bury anything excised from a story. For some reason, having a cemetery makes it easier to cut, to kill. Because I know the writing isn't lost—it has a place—and I can always return to the freshly shoveled grave and perform a voodoo ceremony.

It took me a year to rewrite *The Wilding,* to move from first to third person, to free up those characters and braid together their stories. And when I handed it in to Fiona in March of 2009, she said—again, in her British accent—"Fantastic. Exactly what we wanted. Now would you mind cutting several of these subplots? And fixing these plot holes? And while we're at it, how about let's rethink the ending?" And, and, and.

And then I got back to work.

I was hammering at the keyboard all week, and hammering at my house all weekend. I ripped out the carpeting, wrenched out the thousands of tacks and staples to reveal gleaming hardwood. I scored the wallpaper and sprayed it with hot, soapy water and scraped—and scraped—and scraped away damp bits of paper, leaving the drywall beneath pitted. So I mudded and sanded and textured and painted. I tossed out the oven. I tossed out the curtains. I unscrewed the cracked, yellowing outlets and light switches and replaced them with white plates and once shocked myself so badly that my thumbnail bled and turned black. I pulled out the brass and shoved in wrought-iron light fixtures. We had a new roof thrown on, new gutters hung.

After a few months, our Realtor stopped by to check on us. He shook my hand—a hand yellowed with calluses and crosshatched with scrapes, colored with bruises. He hardly recognized the house he had sold us, just as I hardly recognized my novel as it moved from first to final draft. "You've been working hard," he said, and I said, "Yes."

Go the Distance

Many years ago, I took a break from my novel to write a short story called "In the Rough." My voice was used to wide-open spaces and didn't want to be corralled, so the sentences kept galloping forward, the scenes piling up, until the story was anything but short, a thirty-four-page beast with long claws and dangling genitals. I knew I was in trouble. Literary magazines generally aren't fond of anything that clocks in over eighteen pages. I couldn't figure out how to make it any slimmer, but I believed in the story, so I sent it off to the races. It wasn't long before the rejections came pouring in.

If I'm one thing, it's bullheaded. I once drank a bucket of hot-wing sauce to win a bet. I've stacked enough metal on the bench press to burst capillaries in my eyes. My wife is five years older than me—and out-of-my-league beautiful—but that didn't stop me, at the age of nineteen, from saying, "How you doing?" And in undergrad and graduate workshops, many students were more talented than I was, but I kept hammering long after they hung up their tools.

This is a lesson I learned from Rocky Balboa. I know some of you probably think it's decidedly unhip to be a fan of the Sylvester Stallone character all these years—and sequels—after the original movie came out, but I don't care. The original Rocky, the scrappy southpaw who lives in a filthy apartment and dreams of a better life, who rises early and falls asleep late, who wants only respect