

## DS, *from* Reality Hunger: A Manifesto

*Editor's note: "Reality Hunger: A Manifesto," from which the following is excerpted, is made up of 563 numbered entries, organized into twenty-six lettered sections. Constructed as a collage of voices and ideas, "Reality Hunger" establishes early on that "genre is a minimum security prison," from which David Shields has already escaped.*

T.

459

When I was eighteen, I wanted a life consecrated to art. I imagined a wholly committed art-life: every gesture would be an aesthetic expression or response. That got old fast, because, unfortunately, life is filled with allergies, credit card bills, tedious commutes, etc. Life is, in large part, rubbish. The beauty of reality-based art—art underwritten by reality hunger—is that it's perfectly situated between life itself and (unattainable) "life as art." Everything in life, turned sideways, can look like—can be—art. Art suddenly looks and is more interesting, and life, astonishingly enough, starts to be livable.

460

I was nineteen years old and a virgin, and at first I read Rebecca's journal because I needed to know what to do next and what she liked to hear. Every little gesture, every minor movement I made she passionately described and wholeheartedly admired. When we were kissing or swimming or walking down the street, I could hardly wait to rush back to her room to find out what phrase or what twist of my body had been lauded in her journal. I loved her impatient handwriting, her purple ink, the melodrama of the whole thing. It was such a surprising and addictive respite, seeing every aspect of my being celebrated by someone else rather than excoriated by myself. She wrote, "I've never truly loved anyone the way I love D. and it's never been so total and complete, yet

so unpossessing and pure, and sometimes I want to drink him in like golden water.” *You* try to concentrate on your Milton midterm after reading that about yourself... Weeks passed; guilt grew. I told Rebecca that I’d read her journal. Why couldn’t I just live with the knowledge and let the shame dissipate over time? What was—what is—the matter with me? Do I just have a bigger self-destruct button, and like to push it harder and more incessantly, than everyone else? True, but also the language of the events was at least as erotic to me as the events themselves, and when I was no longer reading her words, I was no longer very adamantly in love with Rebecca. I am what I read. This is what is known as a tragic flaw.

461

Standard operating procedure for fiction writers is to disavow any but the most insignificant link between the life lived and the novel written; similarly, for nonfiction writers, the main impulse is to insist upon the unassailable verisimilitude of the book they’ve produced. I’ve written three books of fiction and twice as many books of nonfiction, and whenever I’m discussing the supposed reality of a work of nonfiction I’ve written, I inevitably (and rapidly) move the conversation over to a contemplation of the ways in which I’ve fudged facts, exaggerated my emotions, cast myself as a symbolic figure, and invented freely. So, too, whenever anyone asks me about the origins of a work of fiction, I always forget to say, “I made it all up,” and instead start talking about, for lack of a better term, real life. Why can’t I get my stories straight? Why do I so resist generic boundaries, and why am I so drawn to generic fissures? Why do I always seem to want to fold one form into another?

462

Both of my parents were journalists. For many years my mother was the West Coast correspondent for *The Nation*. My father, now ninety-six, wrote for dozens of left-wing publications and organizations and until very recently was a sports reporter for a weekly newspaper in suburban San Francisco. When I was growing up, *The New York Times* was air-mailed to our house every day. Mornings, I would frequently find on the kitchen counter an article neatly scissored out of the *Times* for me to read as a model of journalistic something or other. (I may have made this detail up, but it sounds right, it feels right, maybe it happened once; I’m going to leave it in.) I was the editor of my junior high school newspaper. I was the editor of my high school newspaper. Woodward

and Bernstein were my heroes. My parents' heroes, interestingly enough, weren't journalists but what they called "real writers": Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, Saul Bellow. My father stammered slightly, and in the verbal hothouse that was our family (dinner-table conversations always felt like a newsroom at deadline), I took his halting speech and turned it into a full-blown stutter, which not only qualified any ambition I might have had to become a journalist—I couldn't imagine how I'd ever be able to imitate my mother's acquaintance Daniel Schorr and confidently ask a question at a presidential press conference—but also made me, in general, wary of any too-direct discourse. In graduate school, when I studied deconstruction, it all seemed very self-evident. Language as self-canceling reverb that is always only communicating itself? I knew this from the inside out since I was six years old. In a stutterer's mouth and mind, everything is up for grabs. Stuttering reminds me that lyricism turned counterclockwise is a bad block; my father reminds me that Walt Whitman once said, "The true poem is the daily paper." Not, though, the daily paper as it's literally published: both straight-ahead journalism and airtight art are, to me, insufficient; I want instead something teetering anxiously in between.

463

I have a very vivid memory of being assigned to read *The Grapes of Wrath* as a junior in high school and playing hooky from my homework to read *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Steinbeck's humorlessness, sentimentality, and sledgehammer symbolism hardly had a chance against Hunter Thompson's comedy, nihilism, and free association. I loved how easily *Fear and Loathing* mixed reportage or pseudo-reportage with glimmers of memoir. My sister and I had a rather fierce debate about the authenticity of a scene in which Thompson has a conversation with Richard Nixon at an adjoining urinal. She wrote to Thompson to ask him which of us was right. I was wrong (if memory, that inveterate trickster, is accurate, he called me a "pencil-necked geek"), but still it was liberating to read a work open-ended enough that the thought could occur to you that some of this stuff had to be made up or, even better, you couldn't quite tell.

464

During freshman orientation, I joined *The Brown Daily Herald*, but by February I'd quit—actually, I was fired—when there was a big brouhaha surrounding the fact that I'd made stuff up. I started spending

long hours in the Marxist bookstore just off campus, reading and eating my lunch bought at McDonald's; I loved slurping coffee milkshakes while reading and re-reading Sartre's *The Words*. I closed the library nearly every night for four years; at the end of one particularly productive work session, I actually scratched into the concrete wall above my carrel, "I shall dethrone Shakespeare." (Since I was a teenager, I've been going to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which mixes Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean plays. I recently saw the understudy—with twenty-four-hour notice—play the lead in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Every fifteen minutes or so, he'd call out to the assistant director, sitting in the front row, to provide the line for him. This Cyrano's crippled eloquence, the actor's grace, his refusal to wilt, was much more moving to me than anything in the play or any other play.)

465

As a sophomore at Brown, in 1976, I was trying to figure out how I wanted to write. One of my teachers was John Hawkes, who wrote, "Beyond the edge of town, past tar-covered poor houses and a low hill bare except for fallen electric poles, was the institution and it sent its delicate and isolated buildings trembling over the gravel and cinder floor of the valley." Hawkes was an inspiring teacher, but I had no instinct for the symbolist surrealism of which he was a master; his work offered no guideposts for me. My other writing teacher in college was R.V. Cassill, who wrote, "Cory Johnson was shelling corn in the crib on his farm. He had a rattletrap old sheller that he was rather proud of. Some of its parts—the gears and the rust-pitted flywheel bored for a hand crank—had come from a machine in use on this farm for longer than Cory had lived." I wasn't connected to place in the way Cassill was—I knew virtually nothing and cared less about the San Francisco suburb in which I grew up—and though he also was an exceptionally fine teacher, his work (beautifully crafted as it was) didn't trigger anything particularly crucial for me, either.

466

Thirty years ago, my college girlfriend and I shared a summer house in the Catskills. We'd go to the general store and have a slightly off-kilter conversation with someone about, say, a lawn mower, then in the middle of the night she'd wake me up and ask if I wanted to read, say, a fourteen-page fantasia entitled "Monologue of the Lawn Mower." This happened over and over again that summer, so much so that I came to

dread doing anything very dramatic with her, lest she knock me over with her magnum opus.

467

On my breakneck tour of European capitals the summer after graduation, I carried in my backpack two books: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Swann's Way*. Just as Steinbeck's allegory had bored me and Thompson's meditation on the real had enthralled me, García Márquez failed to hold my attention and Proust became a year-long addiction. I loved how Marcel was both sort of the author and sort of a character; how the book was both a work of fiction and a philosophical treatise; how it could talk about whatever it wanted to for as long as it wanted to; how its deepest plot was uncovering the process by which it came into being.

468

In graduate school, where my first creative writing instructor said she wished she were as famous to the world as she was to herself, and my second creative writing instructor said that if he had to do it over again, he'd have become a screenwriter, I was surrounded by older and better writers who wrote more relaxedly, whereas I was trying to sound like Thomas Hardy. *Oh, I see*, I remember realizing, *you write out of your own experience. You write in your own voice and don't try to write literature per se*. I don't know why I needed to learn this, but I did. *And if part of your childhood was watching Get Smart, it's okay to mention that; don't pretend you grew up in France*. This was hugely revelatory, though it seems self-evident now.

469

Perhaps under the influence of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which when I was going to school there in the late 1970s was a citadel of traditionalism (as, for that matter, it still is), my first novel couldn't have fit any more snugly inside the rubric of linear realistic novel and is the only book I've written that is pretty much whole-cloth invention. But I wanted to write a book whose loyalty wasn't just to art but to life—my life. I wanted to be part of the process, part of the problem.

470

For quite a while I wrote in a fairly traditional manner—two linear, realistic novels and dozens of conventionally plotted stories. I'm not

a big believer in major epiphanies, especially those that occur in the shower, but I had one, about fifteen years ago, and it occurred in the shower: I had the sudden intuition that I could take various fragments of things—aborted stories, outtakes from novels, journal entries, lit-crit—and build a story out of them. I really had no idea what the story would be about; I just knew I needed to see what it would look like to set certain shards in juxtaposition to other shards. Now I have trouble working any other way, but I can't emphasize enough how strange it felt at the time, working in this modal mode. The initial hurdle (and much the most important one) was being willing to follow this inchoate intuition, yield to the prompting, not fight it off, not retreat to SOP. I thought the story probably had something to do with obsession; I wonder where I got that idea—rummaging through boxes of old papers, riffling through drawers and computer files, crawling around on my hands and knees on the living room floor, looking for bits and pieces I thought might cohere. Scissoring and taping together paragraphs from previous projects, moving them around in endless combinations, completely rewriting some sections, jettisoning others, I found a clipped, hard-bitten tone entering the pieces. My work had never been sweet, but this seemed harsher, sharper, even a little hysterical. That tone is, in a sense, the plot of the story. I thought I was writing a story about obsession. I was really writing a story about the hell of obsessive ego. It was exciting to see how part of something I had originally written as an exegesis of Joyce's "The Dead" could now be turned sideways and used as the final, bruising insight into someone's psyche. All literary possibilities opened up for me with this story. The way my mind thinks—everything is connected to everything else—suddenly seemed transportable into my writing. I could play all the roles I wanted to play (reporter, fantasist, autobiographer, essayist, critic). I could call on my writerly strengths, bury my writerly weaknesses, be as smart on the page as I wanted to be. I'd found a way to write that seemed true to how I am in the world.

471

I fell deeply under the sway of self-reflexive documentary filmmakers such as Ross McElwee, monologists such as Spalding Gray, Rick Reynolds, Sandra Bernhard, and Denis Leary, and anthropological autobiographers such as George W.S. Trow and Renata Adler. What was it about their work I liked (still like) so much? The willed confusion between field report and self-portrait, the willed confusion between fiction and nonfiction; the author-narrators' use of themselves as personae, as

representatives of American feeling-states; the anti-linear, semi-grab-bag nature of their narratives; the absolute seriousness, phrased as comedy; the violent torque of their beautifully idiosyncratic voices.

472

Dear William,

I admire your work and was a big fan of your lecture, so the misunderstanding between us is particularly painful to me. I take these issues very seriously and am, I think, alert to nuances in this regard, as I hope my work demonstrates. Here's my view of what happened: you mentioned your student's interest in reading novels that deal in different ways with a narrator's willingness or unwillingness to discuss incest or abuse. I thought of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, which I didn't expect to like but which, to my surprise, I did. If you dislike the book, I'd be curious to know why, since I respect your literary acumen as it was revealed in your lecture. When I suggested *The Kiss*, you—rather cavalierly, I thought—dismissed it as beneath consideration. You said something like, “On principle, I'd never have one of my students read *that*.” To me, the implication was that you didn't like “memoir” or that you didn't like books that had gotten too much attention or that you'd read some of the withering reviews and had perhaps prejudged it (as I had). So I was genuinely asking you, “Have you read it?” My tone was probably a little querulous, for which I apologize, but that had nothing to do with the fact that you're African American and everything to do with my frustration at times with the extremely traditional aesthetic that predominates at this conference. I find that the kind of work to which I'm most drawn is often condescended to here, and my snappishness had to do with that. When Melanie said, “You can't assign *The Kiss*; it's memoir,” I practically shouted at her: “Writing is writing. Every act of composition is a work of fiction”—an argument I'm going to try to make or at least explore in my lecture on Thursday. Let's continue the conversation. Write me back, or let's get together to talk.

Best,  
David

473

I'm hopelessly, futilely drawn toward representations of the real, knowing full well how invented such representations are. I'm bored by

out-and-out fabrication, by myself and others; bored by invented plots and invented characters. I want to explore my own damn, doomed character. I want to cut to the absolute bone. Everything else seems like so much gimmickry.

474

For me, anyway, the fictional construct rarely takes you deeper into the material that you want to explore. Instead, it takes you deeper into the fictional construct, into the technology of narrative, of plot, of place, of scene, of characters. In most novels I read, the narrative completely overwhelms whatever it was the writer supposedly set out to explore in the first place.

475

I have a strong reality gene. I don't have a huge pyrotechnic imagination that luxuriates in other worlds. People will say, "It was so fascinating to read this novel that took place in Iceland. I just loved living inside another world for two weeks." That doesn't, I must say, interest me that much.

476

The center of the artistic process—for me—is the attempt to transform a particular feeling, insight, sorrow into a metaphor and then make that metaphor ramify so it holds everything, everything in the world.

477

The only way I've found I can live, literarily, is by carving out my own space between the interstices of fiction and non-.

478

I'm constantly scribbling mini-epiphanies in my notebook, but I make sure my handwriting is illegible enough that half an hour later I can't quite decipher the crucial revelation.

479

The 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction was awarded to Geraldine Brooks' *March*. Have I read it? No. Will I? No. I come not to bury Brooks but to dispraise fiction, which has never seemed less central to the culture's sense of itself. I'm drawn, instead, to the confessional mode because I like the way the temperature in the room goes up when I say, "I did this"

(even if I really didn't). I like a documentary frame around the material for the way it promises news of the world, even though I couldn't care less what happened and what didn't, and I know that there's no way to mark the difference, since memory is a dream machine. I can't write a note to my daughter's seventh-grade humanities teacher (hi, Sam!) without little lies leaking in. Whatever can be said gets said. Language is a weird, somewhat whimsical governor. When I read fiction, I look for what's real, try to identify the source models. When I read nonfiction, I look for problems with the facts. I recognize no difference along the truth-continuum between my very autobiographical novels and my frequently fib-filled books of nonfiction. Or is this the ultimate fiction, the autobiographer slipping the bonds of actuality now that his adventures have gone public?