

[Confess] **Caress** the Dragon:
[Writhing] **Writing** Memoir

I am *[riddling]* **struggling** with *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*, a voice-activated word processing system. I am jabbing at the telephone redial button to the *Dragon* help-line so I can *[writhe]* *[right]* **write**, this *[hex]* **text**. I am desperate for this to work, because my hands are *[devested]* **devastated** by computer-generated carpal tunnel syndrome and other injuries too frustrating to *[settle]* *[sell]* **spell** into this program. How to *[race]* **trace** the roots of this injury? How to recover myself?

Inevitably, this *[shames]* **shapes** itself as memoir. *Shame*—nice typo—I am ashamed of my Hungarian family. So I try to superachieve: prove to the world that I am a writer and not my divorced mother off with a *[oracular]* **Dracular** boyfriend named “Béla”; prove that I am a *[infest her]* **professor** and not the Grandmother who concocted gypsy hair-and-chicken-heart potions in coconut shells to counteract menopause; *[groove]* **prove** that I am a computer wiz and not Uncle Frank, who, in religious self-flagellation, bearing and atoning for family guilt, walked the cold streets of Paterson—*[hare foot]* **barefoot**. A novel, dissertation, textbook, two thousand poems, and a stress management manual—I’ve been willing to write anything. Anything but *[festering]* (good one, *Dragon*) **fessing** up to my truth. The more I achieve—the more I *have* to achieve—the less worthy I feel—the harder I work—the more my hands hurt.

Things—bizarre and uncanny—are happening: I want to write “first we” and *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* records *Father died*. How did it know I was, just then, thinking about my father’s death? [*Death.*] When I first started to train *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* and paused to think, and forgot to turn the microphone off, the program made words from my breathing: *death, death* it wrote; *death* in lights; *death* and *death*. I started wondering, what [*wounds*] (there it goes) what **words**, what subterranean messages will be lost once the system is fully trained (or I actually read the instructions on how to position the mike). Someone should do a study of what it is that a voice-recognition computer can pick up from our breathing. What is it we say under our [*breasts*] (yes), under our [*births*] (do it), under our **breaths** when we are not articulating words that are safe to say?

[*First nation*]. **Frustration.** For every word I will onto the screen, there’s [*carpal the Coke, global the Coke, girl the Coke, bottle the Coke, quarrel the Coke*] **garbledyhook** to pay, a mouse to slam with my already injured [*Fester test vest*] **fist**, the need to hoist the CPU and monitor to [*Old Old*] **catapult** at a barking dog two acres away. I am struggling not to speak down to the level of *Dragon*’s conventional vocabulary, not to use [*speaking in me*] **simpler** words than I mean, not to edit what I need to say even before I say it so that those who might hear me—will. I stutter. All this is a perfect metaphor for the blocking of my true [*writhing*] (yes) **writhing**.

The thing with writing [*new are*] (renew?) **memoir** is, of course, saying that which others have not or will not hear, that which I cannot, yet, hear myself saying under

my *[best breast birth]* **breath**. When I first dictated an early title to this essay, instead of the “Anything But” I thought I said, the computer recorded *[fist]* “**Fifth and Anything But**.” (Even now it's taken five tries to record the mistake when I want it to.) Taking the *[death]* **fifth** is to refuse to speak that which might *[intimidate]* **incriminate** me. Suppose I told what is darkest, truest, most deadly and intimidating about our family—the spiritual deaths that Jerry Springer’s guests are really hiding behind their yahoo exhibitionistic transgressions? The story that doesn’t fit into neat plots between commercials—that must be experienced slowly and in layers; in pain, and perhaps worse, in unaccustomed *[boy]* **joy**?

John *[brag show]* (nice going, Dragon!) **Bradshaw** recommends we heal the so-called “inner child” by exposing family *[the Nile’s]* **denials**. But the family is a self-sustaining sloshing organism—like a massive amoeba that glops and drags along as a unit—absorbing all attempts of *[my toe con drear]* **mitochondria** to err. What’s good for the family *[tell]* **cell**, is often bad for the individual and vice, yes **vice** versa. The worst thing that could happen to most families—Bradshaw and brag shows notwithstanding—is to forsake denial. Families thrive on rafting *[denial]* **the Nile**.

Denial. To take the fifth on my life is death. As novelist Patricia Hampl said, “The version we dare to write is the only *[trees]* (family tree, tree of knowledge) **truth**, the only relationship we have with the past. Refuse to write your life and you have no life.” Our memories are our treasures. The Dragon sits on them unless we can...something—take the **fist**.

Anything—try everything to write, to re-member what was dis(re)membere

Must have spoken to every Dragon [*timber*] (*Timber* is the dog howling on top of his doghouse two acres away)...must have spoken to every Dragon **tamer** at the help-line: Keith, Lynn, Jim, Paul, Joe, and the young woman who spoke so unclearly I couldn't decipher her name. (Does she embody the me I cannot hear?) So here [*I am the Dragon*] **I have the Dragon** *NaturallySpeaking* headset clamped over my telephone headset, one black-sponged wand coming from the right, the other from the left ("Put it a thumb's width from the edge of your lips," they tell me) making me look like some fly with high-tech palpi—those arm-like appendages that serve as touchers and gropers, feeders and feelers. With this, Morticia Addams would have accessorized! I'm speaking from the left side of my mouth to *Dragon NaturallySpeaking* and from the right to the Dragon tamers: *Open this. Close that. Go to. Right Click. Left Click.* (As if I had hands that could function with a mouse.) "Get rid of your virus shield," they tell me. Go defenseless, no less.

Dragon NaturallySpeaking is dragging. It won't take simple commands such as *Go to End of Line*. Instead, it records *good underlying* (That's hopeful—something good underlying)... *coach of line* (Who, but the writing itself, is the coach here?) *content of line* (It would be nice to be content of line, especially for a poet)...the louder I yell at it, the less it records what I intend. And, of course, it won't recognize curses. What kind of self-respecting dragon doesn't breathe fire? As I await the next [*locked*] the next [*block*] the next **thought** to come, I'm holding my breath for fear that the system will record the *deaths* it hears from my expiration, or, more thrillingly, it will reveal something like the Dragon version of a session at the [*weird*] (good!) **Ouija** board.

I yearn to key in the words, as I used to, eight years ago, before I ruined both my hands dandling a Zenith laptop. To have again the almost mystical experience when I typed my first novel, based on “Cinderella,” into *[arrested]* a **rented** Smith Corona, and the rudimentary memory took in the words, delayed and—almost as if inscribed by a Michelangelo hand from a cloud—the words would appear on the page. All that was necessary was that delay, that disconnection for a moment, to make it seem...*[all mine]* **divine**. Reminds me of the hand of God writing on the wall in the Book of Daniel—*God has numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Though art found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided.* Tell me about it.

Go to End of Line. Scratch That. Correct That. Go to the Bottom. Go to Sleep—what if I become so trained by this system that, when I teach, that’s what I’ll say to students? *Scratch That. Scratch That. Go to End of Line.* Joe at Dragon Central tells me to talk “authoritatively, no hesitations, no pauses—word, word, word.” But writing is all hesitation, and pause, and going back, back, going, backhoe-ing...

The first problem, the Knights of the Dragon decree, is that I don’t have enough RAM—random access memory. No kidding. So I send my beleaguered husband, Mort, freshly surviving another of my throwing-things tantrums, down to the local computer nerds with the instruction to “ram in as much RAM as you’ve got.”

“But you don’t need...,” Bob at RT Computer Solutions starts to say on the phone.

“Give. Me. All. You’ve. Got,” I say. Authoritatively.

Then my Dragoneers tell me I need to defrag—misused programs and prompts scatter in the system like a dropped box of Scrabble tiles that need unscrambling. As if I didn’t know. As if I needed a faceless stranger to offer me a metaphor for my unrecollected memories. As I watch the rows of rectangles on the monitor change from raving red to indifferent white to craven yellow to truly blue, I deconstruct the word “Defrag.” “Fragment.” “Frage.” Most Hungarians speak German, as my father and stepmother always did when they didn’t want me to understand what they were saying about me. In German, “Frage” means “question.” My memoir would be more a matter of questioning than telling, of [*unworrying*] (good) **unwording** such things as “Crazy Hungarian,” “Wacky Grandmother,” “Poor immigrant,” “Alien,” “Catholic school drop-out.”

Carl Jung claimed that every part of a dream—whether the avalanche or the person running from it—is a lost aspect of the dreamer: the avalanche of strong feeling that can no longer be [*damned*] **dammed**, the runner who resists. To embrace the whole dream as oneself is to be freer, defragged, at-oned.

I, as so many first-generation television orphans did, replaced my disappointing family with the dream families that flickered within the safe confines of our first eleven-inch Zenith television set. Even here, now, at the computer, I stare at a tube vibrating light. I know that the loss of my hands is only a later manifestation of a family who, losing the Hungarian homeland, fragmented itself. And then the loss of my hands embodied family history.

My adoptive and adopted television family was *The Addams Family*—they tamed [breath] **death** (writing is the taming of breath)—by embracing the bizarre, the ghoulish, the scary. But above all, they loved and adhered to each other. In one episode, “The Green-Eyed Monster,” Gomez and Morticia suspect each other of betrayal. To soothe and collect herself, Morticia strokes a smoking Chinese dragon figure on their mantelpiece. Gomez finds her there and delivers my favorite Addams line: *The hands that should caress my loving feet now caress the dragon*. The hands that should, metaphorically, sit at the patriarchal foot, now stroke (or, rather, *stoke* (Where are you *Dragon* when I need you?)) the fire-breathing genie on the mantel. The Dragon is the traditional Chinese symbol of power, inner growth, passion, generosity, society, and luck—all that living one’s truth means.

Stroking the Dragon of my despairs, as if it were a genie, I might discover the sultry Morticia in me; and the Grandmama of magical powers; and to realize myself as Itt, a woman so veiled from herself that she has become the veil itself. For to dream my *give-me-anything-but* family as strange is to be separate from myself, as well. To embrace—to [confess] **caress** my Dragon, my family, would be to unstrange and defrag them. It would be to reclaim my hands, that, like disembodied Thing, has too long been severed from me in my immigrant quest for the perfect American self.

“Wake up! Go to sleep,” I yell into the headset to turn the microphone on and off: “Wake up! Go to sleep.” The microphone icon erects. It flops. Erect. Flop. [*Carry your yoke*] **Karaoke** for the soul. “Wake up!”

And so I enter Microsoft Word through my nineteen-inch Westinghouse monitor, as I entered, and was entered by *The Addams Family* through the old Zenith TV screen. My [*curser*] **cursor** hand floats among the words on my [*scream*] **screen**. That hand must be—of course—dear, obliging Thing hide-and-seeking among the leaves of carnivorous Cleopatra—among, as it were, the leaves of this Queen of Denial’s book. Is that Lurch rubbing sandpapery fingers above the ancient [*harpy chord*] **harpsichord**? This keyboard? [Why is “This keyboard?” in bold? Wasn’t the correct term “harpsichord”?] No: Itt’s me. Reach, then, Thing, up to the score. [This last sentence is problematic—it’s the only one in the essay that feels a bit like a gimmick, something that was resisted throughout. Is there something more resonant and fitting? “Turn the page” works, but my difficulty is that the way this is written implies you meant to say “Turn the rage,” which is nonsensical.] Turn the [*rage*] **page**.

THE THING: MY CRAZY FAMILY

—Poisonous ideals ...

Robert Haas and Brenda Hillman

Who needs a Pillsbury-Dough-Boy daddy
nice-nice-ing sunshine up your assets? Or a
doo doo doodoo Martha Stewart mom making you
Snap! Snap! to her will, double-sticking it to you
about her *doo doo doodoo* goody-goody good things?
The Addams Family taught me *my crazy family*

had it right! We live in dungeon dreams
of Brady-Bunch belonging. Better to *Snap! Snap!*
off the reeky rose heads of a Hallmark Card life—
all that *Father Knows Best doo doo doodoo* others
televise they have. Caress, instead, like Morticia, the thorns—
those lush dependable claws of lust, sloth, greed, envy,

hate, and grief that last, unlike petals, and last. *Snap!*
Snap! out of your float down the River Denial and be free.
Confess! Surreal and funereal is realer than real.
Your *doo doo doodoo* grandmama is *Snap! Snap!*-ing
daggers at her son, her daughter-in-law, her grandchildren.
Daddy *would* rather stay home sucking a *doo doo doodoo*

Cubanito rolled in stocks. Your uncle is a festering conduit
of charges—a remake of Betty's *boop-ooop-a-doop* Grampy flashing—
light bulbs. Are you saying "*my crazy family* is going to make me
Snap! Snap!"? Then, you are, as I am in *my crazy family*,
the official Thing T. Thing, this give-us-a hand jane-
or jack-in-the-box, dismemberment—this member meant

for delivering *doo doo doodoo* ego rubs, for dusting secrets
off the table? Come dirty! Fess up! It's a *Snap! Snap!*
to make-wrong, to back-scratch only to be back-scratched
(with a two-handed back-scratcher), to bitch and snarl
my crazy family. Harder to be, as I am, as thing as Thing.
But I have no skittering (*dee dee de*) Itt; no Lurch intoning

You rang? You rang? and being that someone to
turn pages for, to play for me, pay for me.
To secure your place in the family all you need to *doo*
doo doodoo is make a face irrelevant, a voice—
Snap! Snap! Unnamed and unnameable. Be the one hand
doo doo doodoo-ing them on. But keep the other

to yourself—out of the boxed-in, dangling a dervish spinning yourself into the beloved, the beloved. Conduct yourself, as I do, one hand firmly on the Bible of *my crazy family*, the other a floating cursor on my PC, an illusionist detached, prestidigitating *my crazy family* to appear and then, *doo doo doodoo . . .*