#### But along through those years I began to make lists oftitles, to put down long lines of *nouns.* These lists were the provocations, finally, that caused my better stuff to surface. I was feeling my way toward something honest, hidden under the trapdoor on the top of my skull.

The lists ran something like this:

THE LAKE. THE NIGHT. THE CRICKETS. THE RAVINE. THE ATTIC. THE BASEMENT. THE TRAP- DOOR. THE BABY. THE CROWD. THE NIGHT TRAIN. THE FOG HORN. THE SCYTHE. THE CARNIVAL. THE CAROUSEL. THE DWARF. THE MIRROR MAZE. THE SKELETON.

I was beginning to see a pattern in the list, in these words that I had simply flung forth on paper, trusting my subconscious to give bread, as it were, to the birds.

Glancing over the list, I discovered my old love and fright having to do with circuses and carnivals. I remembered, and then forgot, and then remembered again, how terrified I had been when my mother took me for my first ride on a merry-go-round. With the calliope screaming and the world spinning and the terrible horses leaping, I added my shrieks to the din. I did not go near the carousel again for years. When I really did, decades later, it rode me into the midst of *Something Wicked This Way Comes.*

But long before that, I went on making the lists. THE MEADOW. THE TOY CHEST. THE MONSTER. TY- RANNOSAURUS REX. THE TOWN CLOCK. THE OLD

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MAN. TH E OLD WOMAN. TH E TELEPHONE. TH E SIDEWALKS. TH E COFFIN. TH E ELECTRIC CHAIR. TH E MAGICIAN.

Out on the margin of these nouns, I blundered into a science- fiction story that was not a science-fiction story. My title was "R is for Rocket." The published title was "King of the Grey Spaces," the story of two boys, great friends, one elected to go off to the Space Academy, the other staying home. The tale was rejected by every science-fiction magazine because, after all, it was only a story about friendship being tested by circumstance, even though the circumstance was space travel. Mary Gnaedinger, at *Famous Fantastic Mysteries,* took one look at my story and published it. But, again, I was too young to see that "R is For Rocket" would be the kind of story that would make me as a science-fiction writer, admired by some, and criticized by many who observed that I was no writer of science fictions, I was a "people" writer, and to hell with that!

I went on making lists, having to do not only with night, nightmares, darkness, and objects in attics, but the toys that men play with in space, and the ideas I found in detective magazines. Most of the detective material I published in my twenty-fourth year in *Detective Tales* and *Dime Detective* is not worth rereading. Here and there, I fell over my own shoelaces and did a nearly good job of remembering Mexico, which scared me, or downtown Los Angeles during the Pachucho riots. But it would take me the better part of forty years to assimilate the detective/mystery/

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suspense genre and make it work for me in my novel, *Death Is a Lonely Business.*

But back to my lists. And *why* go back to them? Where am I leading you? Well, if you are a writer, or would hope to be one, similar lists, dredged out of the lopside of your brain, might well help you discover *you,* even as I flopped around and finally found me.

I began to run through those lists, pick a noun, and then sit down to write a long prose-poem-essay on it.

Somewhere along about the middle of the page, or perhaps on the second page, the prose poem would turn into a story. Which is to say that a character suddenly appeared and said, "That's *me";* or, "That's an idea *I like!"* And the character would then finish the tale for me.

It began to be obvious that I was learning from my lists of nouns, and that I was further learning that my *characters* would do my work *for* me, if I let them alone, if I gave them their heads, which is to say, their fantasies, their frights.

I looked at my list, saw SKELETON, and remembered the first artworks of my childhood. I drew skeletons to scare my girl cousins. I was fascinated with those unclothed medical displays of skulls and ribs and pelvic sculptures. My favorite tune was "'Tain't No Sin, To Take Off Your Skin, and Dance Around in Your Bones."

Remembering my early artwork and my favorite tune, I ambled into my doctor's office one day with a sore throat. I touched my

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Adam's apple, and the tendons on each side of my neck, and asked for his medical advice.

"Know what you're suffering from?" asked the doc. "What?"

*"Discovery* of the larynx!" he crowed. "Take some aspirin.

Two dollars, please!"

*Discovery* of the larynx! My God, how *beautiful!* I trotted home, feeling my throat, and then my ribs, and then my medulla oblongata, and my kneecaps. Holy Moses! Why not write a story about a man who is terrified to discover that under his skin, inside his flesh, *hidden,* is a symbol of all the Gothic horrors in history— a skeleton!

The story wrote itself in a few hours.

A perfectly obvious concept, yet no one else in the history of writing weird tales had ever scribbled it down. I fell into my typewriter with it and came up with a brand-new, absolutely original tale, which had been lurking under my skin since I first drew a skull and crossbones, aged six.

I began to gain steam. The ideas came faster now, and all of them from my lists. I prowled up in my grandparents' attics and down in their basements. I listened to the middle-of-the-night locomotives wailing across the northern Illinois landscape, and that was death, a funeral train, taking my loved ones away to some far graveyard. I remembered five o'clock in the morning, pre- dawn arrivals of Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, and all the animals parading by before sunrise, heading for the empty

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meadows where the great tents would rise like incredible mush- rooms. I remembered Mr. Electrico and his traveling electric chair. I remembered Blackstone the Magician dancing magical handkerchiefs and vanishing elephants on my hometown stage. I remembered my grandfather, my sister, and various aunts and cousins, in their coffins and gone forever in the tombyards where the butterflies settled like flowers on the graves and where the flowers blew away like butterflies over the stones. I remembered my dog, lost for days, coming home late on a winter night with snow and mud and leaves in his pelt. And the stories began to burst, to explode from those memories, hidden in the nouns, lost in the lists.

My remembrance ofmy dog, and his winter pelt, became "The Emissary," the story of a boy, sick in bed, who sends his dog out to gather the seasons in his fur, and report back. And then, one night, the dog comes back from a journey to the graveyard, and brings "company" with him.

My listed title TH E OLD WOMAN became two stories, one "There Was an Old Woman," about a lady who refuses to die and demands her body back from the undertakers, defying Death, and a second tale, "Season of Disbelief," about some children who refuse to believe that a very old woman was ever young, was ever a girl, a child. The first story appeared in my first collection, *Dark Carnival.* The second became part of a further word- association test I gave myself, called *Dandelion Wine.*

We can surely see now, can't we, that it is the personal observa-

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tion, the odd fancy, the strange conceit, that pays off. I was fascinated by old people. I tried to solve their mystery with my eyes and young mind but was continually astounded to realize that once upon a time they had been me, and some day up ahead I would be them. Absolutely impossible! Yet there the boys and girls were, locked in old bodies, a dreadful situation, a terrible trick, right before my gaze.

Pilfering from my list, again, I seized out the title TH E JAR, the result of my being stunned at an encounter with a series of embryos on display in a carnival when I was twelve and again when I was fourteen. In those long-gone days of 1932 and 1934, we children knew nothing, of course, absolutely nothing about sex and procreation. So you can imagine how astounded I was when I prowled through a free carnival exhibit and saw all those fetuses of humans and cats and dogs, displayed in labeled jars. I was shocked by the look of the unborn dead, and the new myster- ies of life they caused to rise up in my head later that night and all through the years. I never mentioned the jars and the for- maldehyde fetuses to my parents. I knew I had stumbled on some truths which were better not discussed.

All ofthis surfaced, of course, when I wrote "The Jar," and the carnival and the fetal displays and all the old terrors poured out of my fingertips into my typewriter. The old mystery had finally found a resting place, in a story.