A Short Essay

I admit it: I practically live at the computer, either writing my own work or flitting through its prismatic ether—often both at the same time. Over the last five years, I've shifted from a sense of *going somewhere* to check email to feeling as though the ebb and flow of email is as natural as breath. I'm pointing to my iPhone. It feels as though what was once a "communication system" has become intrinsic. It's caused me to wonder whether, and how, the Internet has affected American writing. Ironically, one of my favorite sources of pre-Internet and non-Internet writing is—yes—on the Internet. Longform.org has become a kind of virtual literary encyclopedia, where I go to gather my thoughts when I want something other than the quick cuts of blogs, *Facebook*, *Slate*, and the dozen other websites I'm too proud to mention. Not long ago, while taking a *Longform* break, I ran across this statement made by Steve Jobs in a 1985 *Playboy Magazine* interview:

> *"Your thoughts construct patterns like scaffolding in your mind. You are really etching chemical patterns. In most cases, people get stuck in those patterns, just like grooves in a record, and they never get out of them..."*

Even at age twenty-nine, Steve Jobs knew about neuroplasticity—the fact that the brain's functioning is capable of changing throughout a lifetime—but he was also acutely aware that we tend to get stuck in our ways of thinking, just as we get stuck in ways of behaving. His insistence on the simplicity of design and usability of Apple products may well be responsible for some profound changes in literature. What's the connection? Twenty years ago, when a home computer was a relative novelty, the user was required to know and use code (often HTML) in order to communicate in those first online communities. The Internet was predominantly male and geeky. Word processing

programs were available but required a certain "I am using the new technology!" sense, a commitment to a developing technology rather than a means of communication. Yet as Jobs led the way in terms of simplifying the use of the computer, more and more of us were willing to get online and have a look around.

My first involvement in an online community began in 1997 on a site devoted to investing in the stocks of the new high tech companies in Silicon Valley. The Internet site I joined was a virtual wild west of the anonymous, and often the powerful, I quickly learned that the ability to connect instantaneously with thousands of people could lead to all sorts of thrilling and nefarious stock trades. Recently divorced, and knowing little about household accounting, much less the financial world, I spent a couple of years reading and being tutored in the ways of computer technology and the stock market by the members of the website. I began to trade technology stocks, then options, online. I made money. Lots. It was hard not to in those days.

But once the century turned and the stock bubble burst, it was time to find another use for my computer. I'd begun to submit poems to literary magazines. There were a few, *Blackbird* and *Drunken Boat* come to mind, that existed exclusively online. They were the subjects of much discussion among my poet friends. Why send work to a magazine that existed only online? What about the pleasure of seeing your name in print—and on paper? Of being able to make copies for your files? Did online publications count on a C.V.? How long would these magazines last anyway, if there's no *there* there? And this is what's shifted, this sense of *there* where literature's concerned. The Internet is not a place. It's a state, a state of change, a cyborg of technological evolution and human adaptation.

On a recent blustery Saturday, my husband and I settled on the couch with bowls of beef stew and scrolled through the dozens of films and television series available to us via Netflix streaming. We chose *Elegy*, a sexy/sad film about a May-December relationship starring Ben Kingsley and Penelope Cruz. The late Dennis Hopper made a thoroughly believable middle-aged poet, tobogganing down the backside of literary fame atop the supple bodies of M.F.A. students.

As much as I'm tempted to write about Hopper's uncanny portrayal of a poet of a certain age, this little essay is about how the surge of personal technology, not personal temerity, has affected my thinking about—and writing—poetry. Seventeen years ago when I began in earnest to write poems, I'd settle in at my personal computer, a whirring city of tower, screen, keyboard and mouse which heated up my "computer room" despite its loud fan. There was freedom in the ability to type and delete words with ease, and most important, to see during its composition exactly how a poem would look on the page. While others of my generation cite poets like Eliot and Yeats as early influences, I was an E. E. Cummings devotee, and his experimentation with typography gave his work a sense of movement that I found very provocative. Thinking now about how Cummings managed to achieve these effects on a manual typewriter, much less deal with the protestations of editors over the difficulty of printing his work, I shake my head in wonder. The advent of the word processor made it much easier to play with the location of the text within the field of white space. It seems clear that the fragmentation (visual and otherwise) in the literature of our time is due not just to the increased velocity of everyday living, but also specifically to the velocity of electronic communication and the visual choices it offers writers. I'm convinced that the ability to

edit my work in real time, as well as archive it (with increasing reliability) have accelerated my stylistic evolution by encouraging play and risk taking.

My work has come unfastened from the left margin. The lines float and dive through white space. Recently I've been coupling lines according to sight rhyme, which seems to make them read more like music than words. This is pleasing to me. Like many poets, I hear the lines rather than see them while writing; they exist as auditory memory rather than visual. The computer screen's scrolling capability has introduced necessary movement in both the composition and reading of anything but the briefest poems. I often think of the player piano's perforated paper rolls, or of the tiny studded brass rolls in music boxes, when scrolling through poetry on a website. Movement has become part of the reader's experience of a poem online. It's certainly become part of my intention during composition.

The film Bill and I watched the other night was released only four years ago (in 2008), yet the shrinking of the size of personal technology is stunning. Ben Kingsley did plenty of talking on his cell phone in *Elegy,* and the sound of his phone snapping shut like a toothless alligator made me smile. The heavy phallus—er, camera—he uses to document Penelope Cruz's healthy femininity also seemed like a relic. Yes, yes, I know there are photographers who love their pre-digital machines and the ill-lit caves necessary for processing those photos. I understand the physical pleasures involved in the old ways. Yet I can't help thinking that photography, like literature, might be undergoing a shift in design that is due in large part to the very machines we operate while creating it.

It was only two years ago (April 2010) that the iPad was brought to market. One step removed from a handheld full-use computer, it's become widely used by writers.

Download a writing app (I use *IA Write*r), buy a full sized keyboard with Bluetooth, and you can write anywhere. Then save it to the Cloud. Now the last remaining sense of "place" has been removed from my writing. I've had a laptop for years, but there's something about a tablet's lightness, its *bookishness*, that makes the experience of writing feel untethered from the computer. I further this delusion by ignoring the fact of the Google app I've downloaded (which leads oh-so-easily to online thesauri, dictionaries, and countless nonliterary distractions.) The iPad's replaced my Moleskine notebook, the bank receipt in my purse, the bar napkin. It's replaced the desk, the file cabinet, and those leaky extra fine rollerball pens (black ink only).

It strikes me as I sit here on my porch preparing to send an electronic document to a friend with whom I've communicated only electronically over the last three years in the hope that he'll see fit to include it in an electronic literary magazine, that much of my experience as a writer has changed utterly over the last fifteen years. (Neuroplasticity lives—after thousands of hours of practice). Some of these changes have entered the work itself as surely as do changes in the political atmosphere or one's physical health. Like the portable screen on which my poems are written, the poems themselves feel more movable and less dense. Will this make them less memorable?

Almost thirty years ago, Steve Jobs' metaphor of the brain as an LP on which thoughts are etched was perfectly apt. Using a physical object to describe an electrochemical process, Jobs helped the rest of us move into an era when the physical has become less necessary. *For better or worse?* I ask myself cynically. We cannot know yet. But its effects on our literature are stored electronically on millions of white screens, cursors flashing at the end of each last sentence—the new metaphor for the future.

Screen

In spring our neighbors down the road turn a goat out
into their field to clear it of wild roses.

The grasses grow and grow through June's humidity
and July's leering heat. By late August all that's visible

are her knobby white shoulders moving like a cursor.
I must be spending too much time at the computer.