The Spoken World

by Brett Garcia Rose

Here are the rules: You must begin every sentence or phrase with a vowel. Any word beginning with a consonant is considered high risk and must be preceded without pause by a vowel ending in a higher tonality. This is the roller-coaster. The letters *M, B, G* and *V* are especially troublesome. Avoid them, substitute with words beginning in a *Z* or *TH* or another soft consonant where possible (hint: you can get away simple letter substitution within a word if you fake a yawn or hiccup), but if you need to use them you will always and carefully place them towards the end of the sentence, when you are out of breath and have the necessary speed and force to break through. This is the run. You can never use words that begin with *T, S, Y* or a hard *C*, and you can never use any word containing an audible *W* or a soft *U*. These sounds are unavailable to you. Find alternatives.

Now construct a paragraph describing what you did today. You have 2 minutes.

A stutterer learns to do this at five years old. By the time we reach nine we can do it in around half a second. At 12 we have the mental equivalent of a college-level thesaurus and will often use three or four syllable words or entire phrases in place of a single word containing a letter we cannot use. A common example is for us to say 'I'd prefer not to agree at the moment,' instead of a simple 'no,' if the word stutters in the internal rehearsal that takes place in the moments prior to verbalizing.

We speak the way writers write, and we edit in real time. And even though the lag lessens with time and practice, a stutterer will likely go his or her entire life without ever having a real conversation. We are three steps ahead of ourselves at all times. We cannot enjoy the present because you can't bear the silence. We love and fear and respect language in way the fluents could never imagine. We think in words, not images, because we are necessarily

obsessed with the delivery of our thoughts more so than their contents, and we are so preoccupied with our verbal puzzles that there is no room for anything else. And although we may only speak 30 or 40 words in a given week, we have a constant stream of dialogue running through our minds. Life, for us, is an ongoing rehearsal.

School is a problem beginning at a very early age, but not because of the social abuses put upon us. Those are not unique to stutterers, and we learn to take it just as any other outcast groups of children do. Fat, ugly, pimply, speechless, it doesn't make a difference. Children are mean, and there is never a shortage of targets. No, we are inevitably undone by our own cleverness, our self-cures. We develop many simple and complicated ways to avoid speaking. The survival of a young stutterer depends on his or her ability to avoid attention, to eliminate the reasons and opportunities to speak. As long as we're allowed to keep silent, we believe we're just like everyone else. Much of this involves simply becoming smaller; if we cannot get something on our own then we just learn to not want it. We spend our entire lives going around things others take for granted, things they look forward to.

We don't make friends. We don't date. We don't fall in love. We take whatever jobs we can find, because we don't interview.

But we do speak, and we are proud when we speak well. One sentence well delivered means as much to us as an entire graduation speech means to the valedictorian. Our speech is funny, sure, stilted and put together wrong even when properly rehearsed and delivered, but it's the only speech we have. And no, we are not grateful when you complete our thoughts for us. We want to murder you. My father, of all people, understood this. People were routinely thrown out of our house for less.

Stuttering is not a handicap. There are no stickers or scholarships for us. We get the opposite of special treatment. Teachers often take it upon themselves to cure us of this annoying and disruptive problem, either by brute force or shame. And so, predictably, we fail, and then we rebel to justify our failures, and eventually succumb to

the escalating, negative descriptors put upon us. I could not speak, so I learned to pick pockets and locks. Such was my story, and it is a common one among stutterers. We fail, yet we are not failures.

After nearly dropping out of high school, my father gave me the typical ultimatum of the day, either go to college or get out. It was understood that I was basically retarded and would go no farther. My family was tired. I was tired. We'd all had enough. I'd find a good life as a mechanic or line cook somewhere. I'd live the same blue-collar life the rest of my family did before me. I'd learn a trade. There was no shame in this.

Only, I didn't. Perhaps it was my lifelong anger at stuttering, at my father, at the world. Perhaps it was just fear of leaving. I still don't know. But I never felt stupid, regardless of all evidence and assurances to the contrary. I wasn't book smart in any sense, but I could think. So I applied to the only school that would take me, a local two year community college with no admission requirements and cheap tuition. I enrolled for one semester, five classes, and received a perfect score in every one. Another interesting fact about stutterers; we don't really need to study. We spend our entire lives listening to others speak, and we do it well.

Much to their credit and my own minor astonishment, my family was not surprised at all, and faithfully supported me throughout my difficult college career. Without their unyielding, unforgiving strength I'd have gone no further than high school. There were still many important classes where I received unsatisfactory grades, or simply removed myself and failed when presented with forced participation. And worse, instructors easily notice students who underperform and either go hard or give up. To the sensibilities of the outside world, we are either retarded or rebellious, and sandbagged accordingly. University is not so different from grade school in this respect. But I trudged on. For my father, mostly. Sometimes I excelled, often I failed, but I never received an average grade. And I never quit.

I stumbled onto writing by accident. Classes with heavy emphasis on written assignments were easy for me, so long as I did not have

to read aloud (I often got the flu and lost my ‘voice'), yet I did not think about writing until I began to keep a journal; well, really, until someone important to me discovered my journal and read it in secret. She confronted me a hundred pages in, laughing and crying and questioning. She'd never known I had so much to say. Anything, really, to say. She was, and remains, the most beautiful person I have ever met.

We were engaged to be married a few months later. Several months after that I was the youngest person ever to publish a column in *The Sunday Newsday Magazine*. Three times.

Thus began my brief career in journalism. At my second school, after a year of no friends, no parties, nothing, I wrote a goodbye story and slipped it under the door of the campus newspaper's office late one night, a sad farewell to people I'd never known but desperately wanted to, people I'd watched with envy and admiration and genuine warmth. I wrote a goodbye letter to the student I'd never be, to the people who I would never know. By the time it was published I was long gone. At my next school, a larger, state school, I'd publish a weekly column for two years under a pen name. I discovered, then, that I was not just writing for one person; I could write for everyone. That person was famous. People wanted to know me. They'd invite me to parties, ask for my thoughts, for my friendship, for my love. Everyone wanted to know that person. But I'd never have anything to say. The person they wanted to talk to didn't exist yet. It was time, again, for me to go.

And so I'd transfer again, just leave in the middle of the night, no one to say goodbye to, no one to wish me well or to hold me back. I'd transfer again. And again. At each school I'd publish fiction for the college literary magazines, essays for the journals, columns for the newspapers. At Northeastern University, where I finally graduated, I kept a part-time job cleaning the newsroom, ever aware of my mounting debts. After each production cycle, I'd work overnight scraping the wax from the floors and layout boards for seven dollars an hour. When someone finally connected me as the wax guy to me as the columnist in the same paper, to the fiction writer in the

literary magazine, to the essayist, I was offered leadership editorial positions of increasing responsibility, and one of the few regrets I carry with me was that I never accepted any of them. I was becoming a good writer and an excellent researcher, sure, but the inability to use a telephone made the task all but impossible. No one texted back then. No one emailed. I was tired of failing.

I was good with computers, however, and my last few months in school I was instrumental in budgeting and implementing a conversion to full electronic publishing. My advisors thought I was autistic, but they accepted my plan wholesale, and I made it work. Three months later the university newspaper, one of the largest student papers in the country at the time, was fully electronic. No more wax. My job was done. My final effort as a journalism student was to shed my weekly column and write a three part, front page investigative series on animal research and abuse on campus, resulting in a suspension of federal funding for the university biology department, and significant disciplinary action against me. I'd been funny in the past, literary, romantic even. Now I had teeth. But it was worth every word. I went on to become an underground writer and researcher for the animal rights movement, and eventually became production editor of the Animal's Agenda, the international magazine of animal rights activism. My journalism, however, would go no further. Eventually, someone would always ask me a question. And laugh at my non-answer.

At the same time I also entered general electronic publishing, designing layouts for Popular Mechanics, Redbook, Windows Magazine, MacMillan trade books and other publications, but this, too, was a short-lived career. I was summarily ejected due to another small handicap I had kept hidden; I am colorblind, and inevitably made a costly mistake on a central layout. Colleagues covered for me initially, but people only go so far. Thus ended my career in writing and publishing.

So I went to a trade school on a federal assistance program and learned software engineering. I studied database theory at Columbia University in the evenings. In 1995 I started my own company,

inventing a system called Concept-Tel for the wholesale telecommunications industry. I am the sole employee, designer, developer, salesperson and CEO, and continue in this capacity today. My closest competitor has nearly forty employees, and yet I succeed well enough, and often excel. Other times I fail, go broke, work for other companies. But I'm used to that. A stutterer learns failure at about the same time other children Lego.

Still, all these years later, I wish I had found a way to stay the course. I wish I had kept writing every single day, as I did then. I wish I had the courage to not bend to the world. I wish I could still talk to that young woman who discovered me, who gave me my first chance to communicate with the world. It was not my stutter that ended my writing career. It was not the misinformed teachers and counselors and therapists. It was not the meanness of my peers. It was not my parents. It was me. The world had not beaten me. It had challenged me. What everyone saw as my success was, to me, a profound failure. I'd spent a lifetime avoiding the very thing that had saved me. My writing.

Like so many others, I began writing out of despair and a sense of disconnectedness form the world, out of loneliness and fantasy. In my writing I was fluid and fluent, I could be charming or terrifying or wise. In my writing I had friends and purpose and value. I was someone to talk to, someone to love. In my writing, I discovered myself. In discovering myself, I came to know the world.

Eventually I overcame my stutter and evolved into the speaking superhero that I had so often fantasized about, but I still write for the same basic reason. Like someone who moves into a new home and renovates it to their liking, I recreate the world I inhabit through my fiction, and although my changes are often small and subtle, when I am finished and read back what I have written, that world seems like a better place than before. My characters are lonely, though. They don't talk much. They don't need to. But in all my work, and my life in general, there is that unyielding, ever-present loneliness that all stutterers share, and the profound power that accompanies its presence. I do think this is a common path that

many writers take; it begins as a curiosity, then an art, then an outlet, then an addiction and finally an immersive way of life. TO a stutterer, it is a lifeline, no less important to us that air or water or love. For me, though, the real world is indistinguishable from fiction, and the more I write, the greater control I gain over that fictional world, which directly translates into greater power over my own life.

I learned to shed the thick skin I'd developed as a stutterer. I overcame all of that tremendous anger that all stutterers bear. In the end, it served no purpose. I deserve and demand from the universe no less than anyone else. After many years I'd come to learn what others accept as children. All you have to do, is ask. The world is only as frightening as you allow it to be.

So two years ago I'd finally done what I'd always feared, what I'd always found a way around and made silent excuses for. An editor of a magazine that published some of my work asked me to read in public. I said no, but he just told me the date, and how long I was to read for. I was a writer, he'd said at the time. This is what writers do. He knew nothing of my stutter, and still doesn't, but assumed that this was a fear all new writers had to deal with. I was to compete in Literary Death Match, next to successful writers, in front of famous judges. I had weeks to prepare, and seven minutes to read.

I invited my family. I'd memorized every word of my story so I would not have to deal with paper. My plan, all along, was to announce up front that I was a stutterer, that I was nervous, that I would do my best. I would ask for patience, for lenience and acceptance. Once on stage, however, I did no such thing. I looked at the lights and the judges, at the hundreds of waiting faces in the audience, at my family. I just started reading, and I read slowly, confidently. I read well. When it was over, I'd expected my family to be astonished, to be proud and amazed at the words coming from my mouth, for no such thing that had ever seemed even remotely possible to me. My mother commented that I sounded like I had a southern accent. People talked with me late into the night and, for the first time, I answered. The next morning, the Miami Herald published excerpts from my story. There was no mention of any

horrible speech problems or people laughing or booing. None of it happened. And I realized, at that moment, that I was no longer a stutterer. My family had forgotten. My audience never knew. Even the journalists couldn't figure it out. I was, simply, a writer. The stutterer was gone.

I read my work in public now from time to time, and am heckled and critiqued as all writers are, but never for my speaking. Every word I utter is a profound victory. I am a writer and a speaker, no better or worse than any other. No one need know I was ever a stutterer. And I have no more pity for those who stutter than for those who can't write. Personally, if I had to choose, and I remember when I was forced to, I'd choose writing. Every time.

I have the same insecurities as any other person now. I feel unprepared, at times unworthy and exceptionally lucky, and yet I know there is more to it. For no matter the success I find in software, it is insignificant to the pride I take in writing, and the pure exhilaration I feel when I am able to write well, to finish a good story or even a page in one, and to know that it is mine, mine alone and hard-won. I give no further thought to speaking. Whatever I have to say, I say.

And so I return to my beginning as a writer. To write regularly, to understand the craft and trade more completely. To become, finally, a writer, as corny as that may sound. It is difficult and at times frustrating and disheartening; I am a young writer and largely self-taught, with all of the bad habits and insecurities that come with that meandering and unstructured effort. Yet I continue, I persevere, in the same way I have in my career in activism, in my software, in my stuttering, and in my life.

I'll never be that person who comes through my writing. None of us ever are. We pass one another at times, these two eager selves, we nod and acknowledge each other as peers, as equals, distinct and ever distant yet, in the end, friends. The spoken world is bigger than I had ever imagined it to be, wonderful and relentless and unforgiving, and to be a part of it was my grandest childhood fantasy. I don't know what the world sees me as now, just another

guy trudging along the same road, at once careful and reckless as we all are. I still don't speak much, and I find the world every bit as mean as I did when I was a child. Inside I will always be a stutterer, with all of the wonderful gifts and peculiarities and sadness earned as such. But outside? In the big real world I had hidden from so well and for so long? Outside, I'm just another writer, struggling to find words, to be heard and understood and absorbed. Searching, at long last, for something to say.