



**A** man in our town is both a dog and its master. The master is impossibly unjust to the dog and makes its life a misery. One minute he wants to romp with it and the next minute he slaps it down for being so unruly. He beats it severely over its nose and hindquarters because it has slept on his bed and left its hairs on his pillow, and yet there are evenings when he is lonely and pulls the dog up to lie beside him, though the dog trembles with fear.

But the fault is not all on one side. No one else would tolerate a dog like this one. The smell of this dog is so sour and pungent that it is far more frightening and aggressive than the dog itself, who is shy and pees uncontrollably when taken by surprise. It is a foul and sopping creature.

Yet the master should hardly notice this, since he often drinks himself sick and spends the night curled against an alley wall.

At sundown we see him loping easily along the edge of the park, his nose to the breeze; he slows to a trot and circles to find a scent, scratches the stubble on his head and takes out a cigarette, lights it with trembling hands and then sits down on a bench after wiping it with his handkerchief. He smokes quietly until his cigarette has burned down to a stub. Then he explodes into wild anger and begins punching his head and kicking himself in the legs. When he is exhausted, he turns his face up to the sky and howls in frustration. Only sometimes, then, he will pet himself on the head until he is comforted.

—*excerpt from "A Man in Our Town"*

# Q&A *with* Lydia Davis

## Man with Dog and a Madeleine

MATTHEW SHARPE

**Matthew Sharpe:** If it didn't say "stories" right here on the cover of your latest collection *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant* (Picador, 2002), I don't know if I would classify them that way. Do you have a working definition of "story"?

**Lydia Davis:** That's a tough question that I don't have a really clear answer to. I started out wanting to write stories and never had any ambition to be a novelist or a poet. The first stories I wrote attempted to be conventional narrative stories. Then I found that form constricting. I liked beginning to, say, write a story that wasn't at all fictional, but had a conventional form, or write a story that was not very fictional that sort of began in the middle and ended in the middle. At no point did I think, "I'm going to write a poem." There's also a problem with terminology, because I have tried to think well maybe I shouldn't be calling them "stories" because they're prose poems or they're texts, but I just don't like "prose poem" and "text." I guess I just decided to go on calling them "stories," and let the definition of story change a little bit instead of finding the right term.

**MS:** Something you do to end some of your stories is break the pattern, or introduce some new element into the pattern that sets in motion a whole new problem....

LD: Well, endings are tough. Especially if you set up a pattern, you don't want the ending to be too predictable. And yet it can't be too wildly off-base, either. I just finished one called "Jane and the Cane." It's just a paragraph. I liked this paragraph very much, but the ending was really hard. I was using rhyme a lot. There was *Jane* and *cane*, and the *plain cane*, and *complain*—the old mother complained about Jane and her plain cane. It practically rhymed every sentence. I didn't want it to end too flatly. I finally did find an end—the mother was so tired of Jane and her plain cane. And that sort of worked, because by then we might be tired of Jane and her plain cane, too.

MS: So when you're writing a story that relies so heavily on sound, on the morphology of the words, are you also thinking of Jane as a person?

LD: Though I'm always playing with the language and the sounds and the patterns and the math and so on, the stories are actually very emotional somewhere underneath. The people in each story are very strong and forceful figures for me, since more and more of them are based on real life, anyway.

MS: You've also written fantastical stories, like "A Man in Our Town" (in *Almost No Memory*, Picador, 2001). If you were to give that story to a class as a model for a writing exercise, what would you suggest they do?

LD: We all feel we're composed of many different people and even animals at once. Sometimes you feel very grown-up and confident, and sometimes you feel like a little inept kid. Sometimes you feel more masculine, sometimes more feminine. Sometimes you want to get down on the floor and play with the dog, just like another dog. The idea of one thing being two things in one. I really do believe that imi-

tations are very helpful in learning to write. You could take almost any of these stories and read it and see what the rules are behind it and then extract those rules.

I've given assignments like that to my college students. With one class, I decided that half of them wrote too plainly and half of them wrote too fancy, so I gave the fancy ones Hemingway imitations to do and I gave the plain ones Joyce imitations. I gave a sort of mock quiz last year, like a midterm exam at the time when they were having real midterm exams. It consisted of one exercise after another. *Write a paragraph in monosyllables, write a character description from the point of view of liking the person or not liking the person—same character, with the same traits, but positive and negative. Name all the smells you might smell coming into an old factory or a house.* A written paragraph is immensely complex. You can pick apart all the different strands that go to make it up, and practice them one by one.

MS: You've recently completed translating Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* into English. Walter Benjamin says there is no muse of translation. Do you agree? Or, is there as much inventiveness in your translations as there is in your fiction?

LD: Well, one element is missing, and that is the unknown of the invention—if that's what the muse is, that you're sitting there ready to write and something strange happens. But translation has most of the other elements of writing. It's very exciting.

With the passages I'm really happy with, I can dip into them again and again and relish them. It's like baking a good cake or something: I kept working them over and over to make them as close to Proust as possible. But I also just love the writing—"linen smells, morning smells, pious smells"—or trying to use alliteration when he does—"homey, human"—

and the end of that paragraph—“...as the fire baked like a dough the appetizing smells with which the air was all curdled and which had already been kneaded and made to ‘rise’ by the damp and sunny coolness of the morning, it flaked them, gilded them, puckered them, puffed them, transforming them into an invisible, palpable country pastry, an immense ‘turnover’ in which, having barely tasted the crisper, more delicate, more highly regarded but also drier aromas of the cupboard, the chest of drawers, the floral wallpaper, I would always come back with an unavowed covetousness to ensnare myself in the central, sticky, stale, indigestible, and fruity smell of the flowered coverlet.” I had such fun with the sounds there. It had the appeal of a word puzzle—I like word puzzles like crosswords. Translation is something akin to a puzzle—you have to do this and you have to do it this way, and if that doesn’t work you try this—ah, now it’s working better. So you have the word puzzle, but you also have the sound of the language, and the real, intense pleasure of writing, and the excitement of writing in English one of the great books of the 20th century. That just can’t be beat.

**MS:** Shall we do a compare-and-contrast of a passage from the old translation of *Swann’s Way*, by C. K. Scott-Montcrieff (Vintage, 1989), and the new one, Lydia Davis (Viking, 2003)?

**LD:** Those passages are not as different as some. But you’ll notice that there are only a few places where we’re really exactly the same. “Lazy and punctual as a village clock” is the same, and “linen smells, morning smells” is the same. I noticed maybe three places where Montcrieff added extra words. He wrote “a whole secret system of life, invisible, superabundant, and profoundly moral.” He adds “system of” and “profoundly.” So he’s feeling that the rhythm needs more—he wants the extra beats. He does that throughout.

**Montcrieff translation:** They were rooms of that country order which—just as in certain climes whole tracts of air or ocean are illuminated or scented by myriads of protozoa which we cannot see—enchants us with the countless odours emanating from the virtues, wisdom, habits, a whole secret system of life, invisible, superabundant and profoundly moral, which their atmosphere holds in solution; smells natural enough indeed, and weather-tinted like those of the neighboring countryside, but already humanised, domesticated, snug, an exquisite, limpid jelly skillfully blended from all the fruits of the year which have left the orchard for the store-room, smells changing with the seasons, but plenishing and homely, offsetting the sharpness of hoarfrost with the sweetness of warm bread, smells lazy and punctual as a village clock, roving and settled, heedless and provident, linen smells, morning smells, pious smells, rejoicing in a peace which brings only additional anxiety, and in a prosaicness which serves as a deep reservoir of poetry to the stranger who passes through their midst without having lived among them.

**Davis translation:** These were the sorts of provincial rooms which—just as in certain countries entire tracts of air or ocean are illuminated or perfumed by myriad protozoa that we cannot see—enchant us with a thousand smells given off by the virtues, by wisdom, by habits, a whole secret life, invisible, superabundant, and moral, which the atmosphere holds in suspension; smells still natural, certainly, and colored by the weather, like those of the neighboring countryside, but already homey, human, and enclosed, an exquisite, ingenious, and limpid jelly of all the fruits of the year that have left the orchard for the cupboard, seasonal, but moveable and domestic, correcting the piquancy of the hoarfrost with the sweetness of warm bread, as lazy and punctual as a village clock, roving and orderly, heedless and foresightful, linen smells, morning smells, pious smells, happy with a peace that brings only an increase of anxiety and with a prosiness that serves as a great reservoir of poetry for one who passes through it without having lived in it.

I noticed another addition a few lines down: “an exquisite, limpid jelly skillfully blended from all the fruits of the year.” Okay, I see why that’s not so bad. I have “an exquisite, ingenious, and limpid jelly of all the fruits of the year.” So where I have “ingenious” he has “skillfully blended.” He puts the modifier in a different place and adds the word “blended.” In French Proust says: “*gelé exquisite industrielle, et limpide, de tout les fruits de l’année.*” So Proust doesn’t say “blended of,” he just says “the jelly of the fruits.” In fact, Proust doesn’t have even the commas you’d think he’d have there—no comma after “exquisite.” He’s very sparing of commas, and I became very aware of that as I was going along. And then I tried to leave out commas where I might have put them in.

**MS:** How do you deal with the social and linguistic context of Proust, translating not only the denotative value of the words but also associations that French people of that time would commonly have to a given word or phrase?

**LD:** I don’t worry about that too much. I don’t prepare. I think it works to go word by word, at least in the first draft. I wanted to read the text

in French as if I didn’t know much about Proust, to read it as if I were coming to it more naively. I think there’s a real danger of loading your translation with what you already know about Proust and about the time, or what you know about the whole book. I didn’t read the whole book before I started. I had read about two-thirds of *Swann’s Way* in the 1970s. I never read a book before I translate it.

**MS:** Why?

**LD:** Because it’s more interesting, more exciting, more adventurous. I don’t really like knowing what’s coming—that makes it more boring. I like going into the unknown. Maybe there’s a little parallel there to my own writing. When I’m writing, I’m writing into the unknown. I may know what I want, but it’s always full of surprises. So I don’t have the approach that some people might think I should have—of studying the period, studying Proust, studying his themes, studying his vocabulary. I think all that could help in one way, but hurt in another, by making it too scholarly. It shouldn’t be scholarly, it should be a living piece of writing. I guess the ideal compromise would be for me to have known all this stuff 30 years ago, and then to have forgotten it.