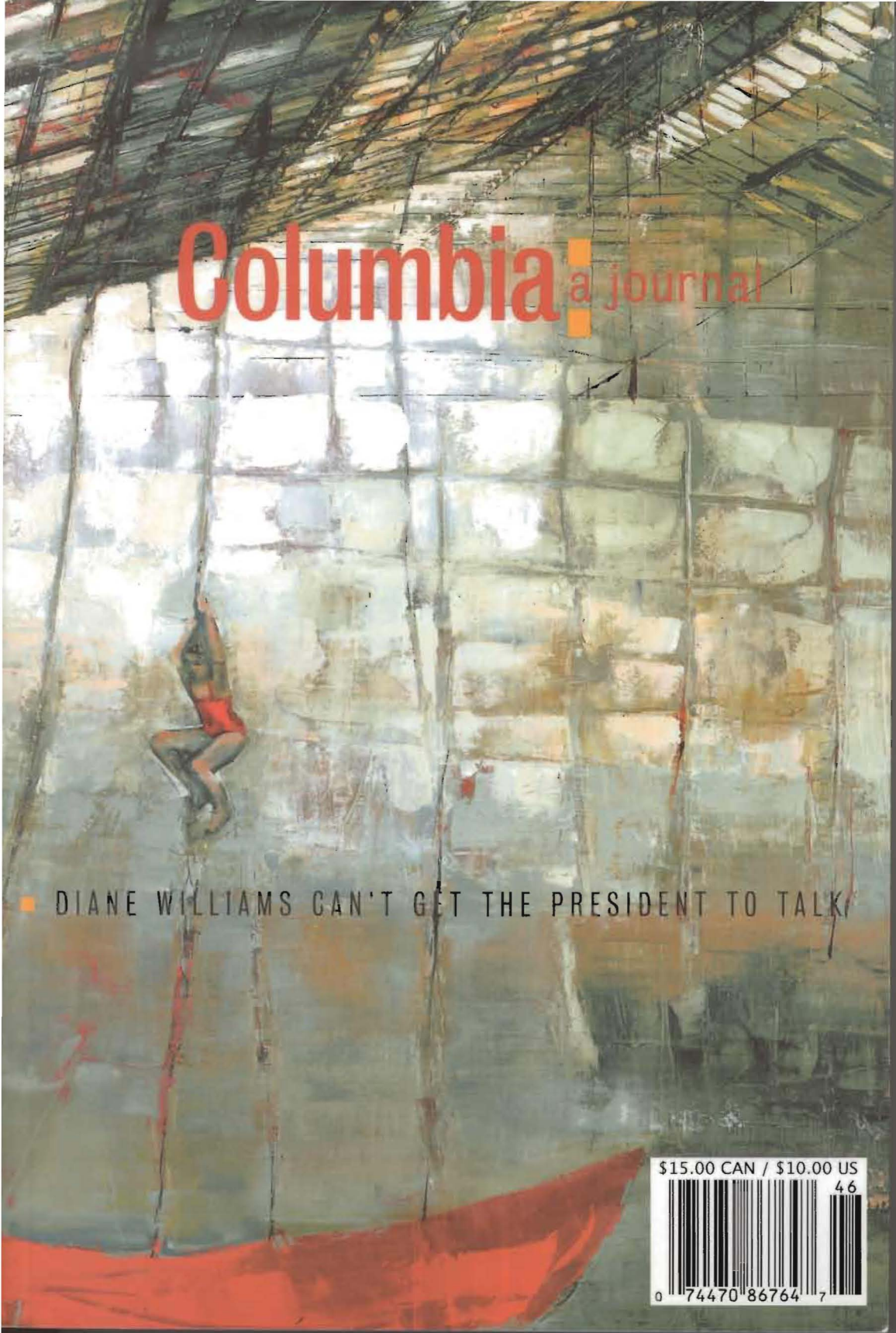

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interview

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SUSAN ORLEAN POSSESSES AN UNCANNY KNACK FOR SEEING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY. SHE MAKES A RANGE OF SUBJECTS COMPELLING, AND WRITES SOME OF THE BEST LEADS IN THE BUSINESS. HERE, THE *NEW YORKER* STAFF WRITER AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ORCHID THIEF* TALKS ABOUT WRITERS FOLLOWING THIER OWN NATURAL IMPULSE; GATHERING MATERIAL FOR HER BOOK-IN-PROGRESS ABOUT RIN TIN TIN (THE GERMAN SHEPHERD THAT STARRED IN THE ICONIC 1950s TV SERIES); AND HOW HAVING A SON HAS CHANGED HER WRITING LIFE.

Susan Orlean on Organic Writing

by Kristin Vukovic

■ **Talk about your Rin Tin Tin book: What you're doing on it now, what you did in Los Angeles.**

All of the historical material related to Rin Tin Tin is out there. There are two principal humans who are important to the subject: One is Lee Dunkin, the guy who found him and developed him

as a star, and the other is the producer of the television show who really brought on his second wave of attention. It's a Hollywood story, actually. So we went out there for me to really work on those archives and interview the people who were still around.

■ **How do you organize your notes?**

I'm not a great note-taker. As I was working in the [Motion Picture] archives, I started thinking, I should have had a system for noting what folder I was taking the notes out of. [While] working in the archives, I typed into my computer, because there was such a massive amount of stuff. But normally, when I'm doing interviewing or something where there's not as much material, I take notes by hand. I type up all those notes, then I print them out and highlight everything that's really important. I like the process of grappling with material several times. I do think that you keep filtering the extraneous stuff out, and on the third and fourth go-round, the material that really sticks, is obvious to you.

■ **You used index cards for *The Orchid Thief*?**

And I used those index cards to organize things thematically. [The Rin Tin Tin] book is different. There's a chronology. Though I feel you don't have to tell the history chronologically, it provides this very obvious thread. There are newspaper ads, record albums, material that is quite different from what I dealt with *The Orchid Thief,* so I'm not quite sure how I'll manage that. ... And in the archives, Lee Dunkin's archives, there are letters, receipts, photographs — so many different forms — how I'm going to note what those are so that I know how to use them is challenging. You've got to use a system that you can really use. Not that you need to invent it, but unless it's somewhat organic to the way you think, it's not going to work.

■ **In one interview, you s**
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■ **In one interview, you said that trying to trace where ideas come from is "almost like trying to trace backward from the source of a headache."**
Did I say that? That's really funny. What a good point!

■ **How do you source ideas for shorter pieces?**
There is the serendipity of stumbling on an idea that comes up in your life. The piece I did ["The Origami Lab," *New Yorker* Anniversary Issue 2007] happened because I was trying to remember how to make an origami box. I Googled "Origami Patterns" and stumbled on Robert Lang. That happens a fair amount, and relies on the habit of mind that sees stories in ordinary experience. The more painful process is trying to come up with an idea when you're done with one story and want to come up with the next one. That's a little like trying to sneeze — you feel a tickle but you can't quite sneeze — rather than a headache.

■ **So how do you know that X or Y will make a good story?**
Pure gut. I'm my best audience. Unless I've been asked to do something and I've decided to do it, I really do stories that come out of my own curiosity. I want to know why a guy would leave the jet propulsion lab to fold paper. I want to know how a 12-year-old girl ends up raising homing pigeons. It really is my own curiosity, and the belief that my excitement about an idea will lubricate a reader's entry into the story.

■ **Someone once told me, "the cardinal rule of profiling is that you never put yourself in the profile." Is your objectivity affected when you're a character in your own story?**
First of all, I don't think there are any cardinal rules. Except that facts need to be factual. Beyond that, I don't think there are any

rules, and I don't think there's any need for them.

■ **And how about objectivity when you're in the story yourself?**
I'm not objective, and I don't pretend to be. Now that's different than saying that the stories are unbalanced or inaccurate or untrue. They're honest and authentic but they're subjective. I'm one person — I can't be omniscient. I think I can be fair. I think I can be encompassing. I think that being empathic is more important than being objective. ... Trying to feel what the story is, trying to feel what the people are like who you're writing about, or entering a story without an agenda ... is to me different from objectivity. My point is that people are really interesting, and that the more you know about life, the more enriched your life will be. That's my only agenda. I'm so glad that you asked that because that's the first time I've ever been able to really express the difference. Because saying I'm not objective sounds like I'm saying something I'm not meaning to say. I think we're all limited by our natural subjectivity. I think not having an agenda means that you can tell the story you saw, and your reader knows that you're saying, *This is the story I saw.* There was a moment that I was working on a *New Yorker* story, when I felt I had to contort myself to write it without making myself present. So I suddenly thought, *Well, I just will.* And I did. And it wasn't that it made the story about me, but rather, it removed this very artificial mechanism for telling the story.

■ **It's part of your voice, essentially?**
It's not that I make myself a character, although in *The Orchid Thief* I was more of a character, which makes sense. It was a book, and one of the themes of the book was about my exploration of the subject. But in these shorter pieces, it feels incredibly natural. And also, it doesn't feel like I need to make a big introduction, because I assume the reader knows that I'm the one telling the story. So it

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feels like, *Well, of course you know that I'm there.* It has felt to me largely organic, now that I've done it a lot.

■ **Figuring out the structure of the piece as you're going into it, as you're writing, is that what guides you, this organic impulse?**

Yes. And that's where doing a book is much more intimidating than doing a shorter piece. Because with a shorter piece, you can absorb the material enough that you're really in control of it; you can work without your notes and only go to your notes when you need to get a date, get the quote, because you really know your story. With a book, it's just not possible. And I was kind of freaked out when I was first working on *The Orchid Thief,* because there's just too much material. Ideally, you break it down into pieces that you can tell, but I think you need to have some pre-existing structure so that you don't get lost in the material, or don't forget stuff that you want to include. Shorter pieces, they're great! Generally, I work on my lead, and it then feels very natural to see where the piece goes next. And when I'm halfway through, I usually stop and look at the material and think, *OK, I still need to tell you some of the history of origami, for instance, so I'll do that next.* Then, I need to be sure to include the section where I watch him working on the laser scriber. So I'll have a list: These things still need to get done, and I think they'll be best in this order. But I begin with the storytelling part of it. The lead needs to come out of somewhere in my head that has processed the story and found a way into telling you about it.

■ **The lead derives from your absorption of facts?**

It is like the way you start a conversation. Some people might practice it in their head, or have a logical reason that they chose one approach rather than another. For me, it's intuitive. I feel

that it does need to be seductive, it does have to give you some information but not enough that you say, "I don't care about origami." It needs to be a tease, and just enough information that you think, *What's this about?* I can tell you in a very specific, quantified way what I want it to accomplish. But how to accomplish that in a particular piece is a little bit magical.

■ **How do you deal with people who say something fantastic, then say, "Oh, but you can't put that in your piece."**
It's really annoying. You feel like saying, "Too late! You said it!" But you have to live with yourself. You have to know your own moral comfort zone. I've published some things that I knew were going to be awkward and uncomfortable, but I've never published anything where someone said to me later, "I never meant for that to be published." I've gone the other way, when sometimes people have said things to me, when I've thought, *This is a person who's never seen their name in print or with a quote and they're going to be very upset if this is published.* And I cannot live with that. I'm just not comfortable.

■ **So what is the main thing that convinces subjects to let you into their lives?**
One is, I think they sense that I am genuinely interested and curious and I really do want to know what their lives are like. It's a really honest impulse.

■ **People probably sense your openness.**
And that is real. I've had the good fortune of having enough time. I think if you have a short amount of time and you're kind of in and out of people's lives, there's no question that it's going to leave them feeling a little less comfortable. It's unnerving. Somebody comes in and they've got 20 minutes and they say,

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"What's your life all about?" and you think, "I don't even know you." And then they're blowing out the door. I just think it's impossible to develop a rapport that's real. I don't even feel that I can begin asking the questions that mean something until I feel that I'm comfortable with the person and they're comfortable with me. That's why working for the *New Yorker* is a blessing. Because you really don't have the clock ticking.

■ **Can you describe your method of unstructured reporting as going in somewhat unprepared?**
Very, very unprepared, actually.

■ **How did you develop that strategy, and why do you think it's effective?**
I don't think I ever wittingly and deliberately developed it as a strategy. As a music critic, I loved listening to all the music, but I didn't like writing as an argument. It wasn't natural for me. And I love learning new things. I love exploring, I love discovering. I love immersing myself in something I don't know anything about. So it's really natural to me, it's the way I am in the world. I think as a writer, or anyone in the creative world, you need to find what feels natural. For somebody else, it would be something absolutely opposite. Going in unprepared is an advantage for me because there's no safety net. And I have to grapple with my own insecurity, my own naïveté, my own ignorance. I really have to rely on the people I'm writing about to teach me. The awkwardness is part of it. The insecurity is part of it. The reliance on my subjects to teach me is important. There's always book-learning that you do. You go back then and read everything you can about the history of origami.

■ **And this approach hasn't backfired?**

I think it's backfired only in that initially, people probably think I'm kind of naïve and ignorant, and maybe dumb. I don't think it's bad to eat a little humble pie. When I started working on *The Orchid Thief* these orchid growers would say, "This one's a clone and this one's a hybrid," and I would say, "I don't understand what that means." And they probably thought, *What's this person writing a book about orchids? God, she doesn't know anything.* In terms of my own ego, I didn't care. They're the experts, I'm not. Even if I spent a year reading books about orchid growing, I still would never match their level of knowledge. I'm hoping they'll teach me and let me peer inside their world. An underlying theme in my whole body of work is that people, all of us, are proud to be the expert or master of something. A lot of my stories are about seeing people mastering their corner of the universe. So it would be counterproductive and counterintuitive to enter that universe challenging them, when the whole point is, I want to see their mastery.

■ **You've cultivated an obsession with obsessive people: Laroche, Lang, Joan Maracek (The Tiger Lady). Are you aware of those themes as you write, or do they sort of emerge? Is there a message you're trying to convey?**

Your view of a subject seems to incline you to make certain word choices, certain material choices. You're kind of serving your theme somewhat unconsciously. I will often sense some more profound message in a story that I don't necessarily want to express explicitly, but I feel like it's a counterpoint melody in the writing. Something as simple as a mood. Or, a bigger, deeper theme. In the case of the story I did about this little girl with her pigeons, it was about home, and what does home mean. And how home for birds is permanent, but for people, it's

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impermanent. And that seemed really important to me and really meaningful. So I had it in my head as I was writing it. It's not something that I wanted to say so explicitly, but I had internalized that idea so much in the course of working on the piece that it seemed to inform all of the choices I was making about words, about tone, in the piece.

■ **You said at one point that the easy story is one with its own narrative engine, not the one which you are pushing out into the world. With these less traditional narratives, do you ever get stuck?**

A lot of times, the place you get stuck is thinking, *Just what is this story about?* Profiles are the least sticky in that way, because you can think, *This is an interesting person I'm going to introduce you to.* But often, where you get stuck is, *Why am I writing this? What is this about?* Often you think, *Why does anybody care about this?*

■ **And what do you do then, when you hit that point?**

It's not that I can't think of the words, it's that I suddenly lose my nerve and think, *Why am I doing this story? What is this story about?* I think the best thing to do is stop. Sometimes, it's a point where you need to do more reporting. Another thing is to stop and think, *Why did I really want to do this to begin with?* I don't think it's about writing, I think it's about reporting or thinking.

■ **What about the writing process sustains you?**

When you write a sentence that you think really works, it's so exhilarating and gratifying. It's so much fun. Or even picking a phrase where you think, *Oh, that's exactly right! That's just what I wanted to do.* There are rewards and things that sustain you along the way — [like] feeling that you got the little cobblestones polished, and then when

you step back and you've built a whole road, you feel the excitement that someone's going to take this journey. And that's going to be wonderful. It can also be hideously difficult at times. And then some stories come really easily. The thing that's disturbing is not knowing in advance which of the pieces is going to be easy. A lot of times, I'll think, *Oh, this one's going to just write itself,* and then it's this miserable catfight to the very end. Other things come very naturally, and you look back and think, *Whew. That was just sort of a groove.*

■ **How has having a baby affected your career?**

It's affected it a lot. The first year, I was in a little bit of shock, suddenly thinking, *How am I going to do this?* Everybody was always telling me — and I knew it was nonsense — "Oh, you're so lucky, you're a writer! You have a baby and it doesn't even matter!" But I travel; my hours are totally unpredictable. And when you're writing, you're often not terribly sociable. And it can be superstressful. I'm lucky now that my husband is on his own schedule and that we have flexibility. But I also think that I'll pick and choose stories differently. I used to always think, *Man, if I didn't have a husband or a kid or a dog, maybe I'd really be a good writer.* Because I'd go anywhere and spend whatever amount of time I needed. You know, it's challenging. When you're out reporting, and it's been a long day and you're with people you don't know, your impulse is to think, *Let me just get out of here and go home and be with my family or my friends.* You're always fighting that. You're always resisting. As much as I say I love exploring, the fact is, I like being with my family and in my own home. So that impulse is pretty powerful. It's why I almost always go by myself when I go reporting. Because I don't want someone waiting for me in the hotel room. I want to make myself stay out there and do that extra bit of work. I still think, sadly, the very best work you might do is

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■ **What is your advice to**

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but I wrote it so long ago. And

when you're really, truly lonely and alone and you have no comfort to return to. But how is it going to change my career? I take comfort in knowing that there are other women at the magazine [*New Yorker*] with kids, though I can't figure out how they do it.

■ **What is your advice to young writers?**

I have always believed that you need to really love writing and have a passionate commitment to being out in the world, learning and devouring it, if you're going to succeed. That's the philosophical and spiritual advice. As far as practical ... the best thing you can do is write and write and write, and then read the writers you love and try to figure out how and why they're so good. As much as possible, only write what you really believe in — of course, when it comes to paying the rent, it isn't always possible to be that pure, but if you can, and whenever you can. ...

■ **What is the most frustrating aspect of being a writer?**

The fact that you're only as good as the story you haven't yet written. And the feeling that, maybe I've already done the best thing I'm going to do. The fact that it's not quantifiable. You can't ever have a sense of complete satisfaction. You've got to do another piece, you're not sure if this one is better. Ten years ago, I would have said that another thing would have been the competitiveness, or performance. I don't think as much anymore about the competitiveness — I feel like I've matured past that. The performance — writing really is a performing art. You have to just keep doing it again and better. It's really funny, because one piece of mine that gets mentioned a lot and anthologized a lot is a piece I did a really long time ago, "The American Man, Age Ten" [*Esquire,* December 1992]. And I just think, *I'm really glad people really like it, but I wrote it so long ago.* And I said to my husband, John, recently,

"You know, maybe that was the best piece I ever wrote and I've been going slowly and steadily downhill since then."

■ **How do you cope with fame?**

This will sound insincere, but it's not. I'm surprised, always, to think people have read my stories, or read my books. I don't have a particular sense of myself in the bigger picture of writers. I'm not trying to be falsely modest. For me, it's a little surreal. Like at the *New Yorker,* I still feel like the new kid, because my sense is so much that I came to this place and there are people who have been there forever. I felt so distinctly new, like an intruder into that world — so many were people I admired. So I don't think of myself as a well-known writer. I don't know if I am or I'm not. It's a weird thing. Part of being a writer is having this anxiety that you're not good, and that you're not anything compared to the people you admire, or that you're faking it and they're real. I'm always surprised, in a nice way, if I'm invited to give a lecture. And then I'm surprised again if a lot of people show up. There's just a disconnect between your own sense of who you are and what you still want to accomplish. I used to have a short list of the things that, If I Could Only Do This, then I'd feel that I'd really come into my own or that I'd really made it. Those are very specific goals: if I had a piece in the *New York Times,* if I had a piece in the *New Yorker,* if I published a book, if I had a book on a best-seller list.

■ **It always becomes elevated.**

Yeah. Because then if you accomplish it, you think, *Well, lots of people have that.* Or, *That wasn't quite as good as* ... That's the overachiever's cross to bear. ■■■

Quail

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