



## THE TOILET AND THE TUNA

By Nancy Etchemendy

It is a dark and dismal day. If the birds are singing, you can't imagine why, and you wish they would stop. You've taken a walk. You've taken a nap. You've sharpened all your pencils, even though you haven't written with a pencil since first grade. You've made yourself a cup of something hot to drink, but now it's cold. It got that way while you checked your email, and then your MySpace page, and then the "Things You Never Knew Existed but You Can't Live Without Them" web site. You've cut your toenails. You've even brushed the dog. And still, you can't bring yourself to open the dreaded file that contains your novel and place your fingers on the keyboard. What's happened to you? If you're susceptible to scary stories, as I am, you're beginning to whisper them to yourself. Maybe you've developed a brain tumor or early-onset Alzheimer's. Maybe you've suddenly become autistic. Anything seems possible.

STOP. You've come to the right place. The NaNoWriMo people, in their wisdom, have supplied you with a stash of pep talks. Why do you suppose they would go to so much trouble? The answer is simple: because you have a lot of company, including me. Writing a novel is hard. At some point in the process, most novelists get bogged down. It's not a tumor. It's perfectly normal. In fact, it's to be expected.

Okay, so now you know you're not alone and you're not going to die from this. That's a relief. But the task of writing your way to a finished book still looms before you like the Mountains of the Moon, dark with mystery, and really, really high. So high, in fact, that the voice is whispering a new fear. You might actually expire from pulmonary edema before you get there. So why not just stop now?

Simple. Because you want to be a novelist. The difference between a novelist and someone who tinkers around with writing is this: *novelists finish their*

*books.*

All well and good, you say. But how? How can you finish when you're pretty sure everything you've written so far is total garbage, you have no idea where you're going, and every time you look at the thing, you desperately want to go and do something else?

First, let's look at the question of whether you're writing something that belongs in the trash can. What you're working on right now is a first draft. Moreover, you're deliberately writing it at breakneck speed, which makes it a *rough* first draft. It's not going to be anywhere near publishable, nor should you expect it to be. I heard or read somewhere an observation by a gifted young novelist whose name escapes me now, for which I apologize. He said that a first draft is like a chunk of marble. It's a big, formless block. Later, you'll carve away the unnecessary bits, and you'll shape what's left into something beautiful. Michelangelo's *Pieta* was once a shapeless block, most of which ended up as dust on his studio floor. As you write, give yourself permission to create that formless block -- the necessary first draft from which a wonderful book can spring.

Second, about not knowing where you're going. This will sound counterintuitive and maybe even crazy. Don't worry about it. Think of your everyday self as a lost rider on the back of a powerful, black horse. The rider may be freaking out. That's understandable. It's frightening to be lost. But your everyday self is not where the creation of a first draft happens. The first draft is the job of the big, black horse -- your subconscious mind. That horse is smart, and it knows exactly where it's going. So trust it. It will get you home. Just write. Put down whatever feels right, even if it makes no sense to you. Don't think too much about it, don't hold the reins too tight, and soon you'll see your way again.

Third, regarding the desperate wish to go and do something else. Every writer has to deal with this. When the work is not going smoothly, the world fills up with inviting distractions. The great novelist and essayist Cynthia Ozick said, "A good citizen writer will put down her pen for a noodle pudding." I'm not sure about the good citizen part, but every writer I know is tempted to put down his or her pen hundreds of times during the course of a writing day. What kind of bird is that, calling from the tree outside? Has Uncle Harvey responded to your email yet? Wouldn't you be contributing more to the world if you were cleaning a toilet or eating a tuna fish sandwich?

No, dear novelist, you wouldn't be. The bird will wait. Uncle Harvey will wait. The toilet and the tuna will wait. You have something important to say, and you are saying it. That is your contribution, without which the world would be a poorer place, and it is one that only you can make.

Now, *write!*