13. Privishing

Our Basic Plan: Your file will be transmitted over a secure connection temporarily exempt from Clarity, automatically error-checked, and made available for access to as few as 1000 users. $59.95

Editorial Review Plan: Your information will be scrutinized by one of our Expert Editors, proofread (if text is included), and shared only with a maximum of 500 users. $99.99

Select Plan: Our Editorial Team will work personally with you to develop a coherent, impactful, and transformative presentation that will be accessible to at most 100 people. $249.99

Platinum Plan: Expert coaches, tutors, pundits, and marketers help you develop a Total Privishing Experience limited to 10 select Target Audience Members. $499.95

Titanium Plan: Your personal, unique creation and all the thought, passion, and experience that go into it will be accessible to one and only one person: You. We guarantee it. $2499.95
I grew up on Nostick, in a wood-frame house with a porch painted dark blue. They tore it down decades ago.

My grade school and high school were on Nostick, and when I married Anna we moved into an apartment three blocks away. We used to shop on Nostick -- there was the Peeler's at Nostick and 25th that had a great produce section, and the clothing stores, and Mack's Hardware. They're all shuttered now or they're selling cell phones or liquor.

James Jr. went to McGonagall Elementary too. Before I knew it, he'd graduated from Tech and moved downstate.

After Anna died, I gave too much to the cancer foundation and had to move into this crummy "residence" half a block from Nostick. Still had the Ford, though.

I was looking at the spots on the back of my hands when I remembered a long drive, could have sworn it was all on Nostick, I must have been no more than eight. Dad drove us all the way up to Matthewsville and after we had ice cream, a guy laying a sidewalk gave me the chance to put my handprints in the wet cement. Must have been before they built the Interstate.

That's how I ended up heading north on Nostick Ave., past the familiar sites, into a no-man's-zen between towns and into Matthewsville, where I hadn't been for maybe 25 years. I looked for those handprints for hours and couldn't find a thing. After peach pie and lots of coffee, I withdrew the maximum from an ATM, filled up the Ford, and kept driving north.

The street was still called Nostick, sometimes Ave., sometimes Drive. It wound on to the next town, Adamston, and now I was in territory that was new to me. We veered off from the Interstate and the towns got more pathetic, the fields more decrepit.

I hit a T. State Route 25. Didn't know what to do. But there was Nostick again, picking up again and heading north about 20 yards down the highway. The pavement was gray and cracked, but I like the open road and drove until I found a cheap motel at sunset.

I've managed to keep following Nostick. Had to backtrack a few times, had to ask for directions. Dug out the damn GPS once but it didn't include the road. Nostick has taken me past abandoned quarries, along streams, on wide-open prairies, over railroads and past lonely North Dakota farmhouses. The ATMs and the gas stations kept me going, I crossed into Canada with no trouble, and Nostick led me through forests and past crystal lakes. Good thing I stocked up on food and water, because we were getting far from any town.

Then the road turned into gravel, then dirt. No signs, no fellow travelers. The dirt road just petered out, you couldn't say where it stopped, and the car was bouncing along a stony clearing, the gas gauge near E, wind coming from the north.

Hard to be sure when the wind's in my eyes, but that house ahead looks like it has a dark blue porch.
Gradual apocalyptic provokes no panic.
So since they couldn't stop the rise, they made it steady. Tides and waves are just memories now; the salty doom laps and swells, subsides but returns, creeping a millimeter a day. And we give up a millimeter of hope every day, with plenty of time to plan our compensations and workarounds.

The breeze is always a gentle one from the west. Here on the fifth floor, we're packing. The undulating brine is just under our windowsill and puddles are forming on the parquet.

Our possessions are few by now -- just the essentials for cooking, comfort, and communication.
There's plenty of room on the upper floors, since by now over 90% of residents have left the city. But instead of moving upstairs, we're going to load up the rowboat and venture out, in the opposite direction from most. We want to heed downtown, still farther from the shore, where a few candlelit offices float like lighthouses over the evening sheen of the sea.

We hear there are permanent parties there, end of the world parties. We used to imagine they'd be frantic orgies, but with gradualism, they're more meditative events, where you can wander in and out freely, where people try to keep their level of intoxication as steady as the ocean.

We gave up diving. The novelty of the sunken city lost its charm. There was only the increasing darkness and pressure, the sludge and slime, the occasional mutated creature; and we lost our taste for bringing up salty relics of the past.

We've seen the inundated bookstores where sudden volumes dissolve and release their words into the water.
We've seen the last remaining foot of a theater ceiling, studded with starbursts, available after a century for anyone to touch in the dark, for a few weeks until it suffocates.
We've seen sudden bursts of bubbles or oil slicks form on the unperturbed water, as remaining pockets on lower floors and in basements finally release their seals.

We feel no need anymore to record what we witness, to notify, to share. All we want is to head for the long party downtown.

Maybe we'll stop there. Maybe we'll stay for a week or a month. Maybe we'll just keep going, rowing with the breeze, as far as we can, out onto our destined waters.
16. Delay

The victory of e-mail over mail was a triumph of acceleration, but the victory of e-mail over the phone was a triumph of delay. We found that synchronized, so-called real-time conversations were all too often awkward and inefficient for both parties. A modicum of delay was liberating.

My own method develops this insight and applies the virtues of delay to all communication. I recommend a wait of 24 hours between exchanges in most situations, emergencies excepted, of course. Delay gives us time to consider, to choose our words wisely, and to reflect carefully on the reply we receive.

In more significant forms of communication, the means of transmission gains in importance, adding to the meaning of the message itself. A painstakingly handwritten letter delivered by overland routes; a tape-recorded greeting shipped complete with a functioning tape recorder; a coded message incorporated in a printed book, which waits on a shelf for some perceptive reader; all are necessarily deeper than a quick utterance, received without effort.

But now all these modest achievements have been set aside. Now I am concentrating in full on the project that will last me a lifetime: a communication developed over decades, intended for an unknown receiver; a message whose arrival at its destination will never be known to its author, an author who must learn to renounce every hope of a reply. This must be the purest form of language, the deepest, the truest.

Know that if you are reading these words, they were written by the dead.
17. Silences

After your sentence, when the animation decays and you're about to begin another train of thought, but haven't found your way there yet and are just drifting, hesitating on the updraft, as your eyes relax their focus and look past mine, past my gaze that meets your inattention and preserves it, sealing your hesitancy in a mnemonic bag to be shelved with other evidence, and your mouth still flushed from speech still keeps its faint verbal tension, and one hair drifts down into your eyelashes, about to provoke a tic.

When I find that I've been lying awake for some time, but the unspeakable feeling of my dream lingers in my chest, a cumulative memory of action and place that demands my paralysis lest it be wiped away, and fights against the cramp in my spine until I have to roll over and see the green digits say 5:59.

The gap between chapters, an author's best opportunity to convey a sense through silence -- a pause for reflection, a shift of time or place, a conclusion that invites a new beginning -- the place where we feel the author holding her breath to find whether the reader will feel impelled to start the next chapter or will put the book down with a clear conscience -- the most dangerous of states -- and take it up again, if at all, in some altered state of mind, some other day.

Just after the storm, when drops are shuddering off the pines, when the air is biting and full of potential, and I've finished the novel with a feeling of pained denial, and I consider your final words for another round in the endless cycle of rumination, and the dream of an all-cleansing flood comes back to me, along with all the clamor and grinding of a crowd at the docks, our huge blue tickets, our shouting match about who will get to carry a single, well-worn pencil that writes in violet.
18. A nonexhaustive catalogue of things that you will never again remember to try to recall

1. The taste of water in St. Louis
2. How to calculate a square root
3. Why you hid behind a pew, when your aunt was looking for you everywhere, and bit your thumb
4. A chill that ran from your knees to your neck at 2:33 pm on a Thursday in August
5. The color of the dust in Sterling, South Dakota when you ran out of change for the candy machine outside a closed convenience store and had to make do with gum
6. The least favorite nicknames of the five most popular girls in fifth grade
7. The twelfth item on this list
8. The score of the basketball game just before the one when you missed that free throw
9. The way your hairs stood on end when you thought you heard your name spoken over the radio in the middle of an evangelical broadcast while you were skimming stations
10. What you were on your way to get at the drugstore, when you stepped in front of that motorcycle
11. The name of the nurse who just left your room