

TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR WRITERS

John Vernon

- I. Thou shalt not take any of these commandments as divinely inspired. In fact you (thou) might find your greatest inspiration in disobeying them. And let's drop the thous and shalt, lest we be smitten.
- II. Art exists in the tension between control and wildness. Every writer must locate herself on the spectrum between these two opposites.
- III. Honor and love language. Love how it sounds, love its multiple meanings, love its shapes and rhythms. Love it like a painter loves paint, like a shoemaker loves leather. Love its textures and colors and infinite suggestiveness.
- IV. Refuse sentimentality. Chekhov: "When you want to move a reader to pity, try to be colder. It will give a kind of backdrop to grief, make it stand out more. Yes, be colder."
- V. Every poem, every story, every piece of writing is experimental, even the most conventional ones. Writers should push at the edges of what they can do.
- VI. Write with irony and love. Irony keeps things at a distance, love enters things.
- VII. All writing is rewriting. Rewrite as you write, rewrite when you finish. Then rewrite again.
- VIII. Write what you know. But for God's sake, *know more*.
- IX. Gustave Flaubert: "Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you can be violent and original in your work."
- X. Kurt Vonnegut (in his book, *Player Piano*): "I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over the edge. Out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center . . . Big, undreamed of things."