

## Priority (2001)

By Lydia Davis (United States)

It should be so simple. You do what you can while he is awake, and then once he is asleep, you do what you can do only when he is asleep, beginning with the most important thing. But it is not so simple.

You ask yourself what is the most important thing. It should be easy to say which thing has priority and go and do it. But not just one thing has priority, and not just two or three. When several things have priority, which of the several things having priority is given priority?

In the time in which you can do something, the time when he is asleep, you can write a letter that has to be written immediately because many things depend on it. And yet if you write the letter, your plants will not get watered and it is a very hot day. You have already put them out on the balcony hoping the rain will water them, but this summer it almost never rains. You have already taken them in from the balcony hoping that if they are out of the wind they will not have to be watered as often, but they will still have to be watered.

And yet if you water the plants, you will not write the letter, on which so much depends. You will also not tidy the kitchen and living room, and later you will become confused and cross because of the disorder. One counter is covered with shopping lists and pieces of glassware your husband bought at a liquidation sale. It should be simple enough to put the glassware away, but you can't put it away until you wash it, you can't wash it until the sink is clear of dirty dishes, and you can't wash the dishes until you empty the drainboard. If you begin by emptying the drainboard, you may not get any farther, while he is asleep, than washing the dishes.

You may decide that the plants have priority, in the end, because they are alive. Then you may decide, since you must find a way of organizing your priorities, that all the living things in the house will have priority, starting with the youngest and smallest human being. That should be clear enough. But then, though you know exactly how to care for the mouse, the cat, and the plants, you are not sure how to give priority to the baby, the older boy, yourself, and your husband. It is certainly true that the larger and older the living thing is, the harder it is to know how to care for it.



Lydia Davis  
born 1947

## Sticks (2013)

By George Saunders (United States)

Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard. Super Bowl week the pole was dressed in a jersey and Rod's helmet and Rod had to clear it with Dad if he wanted to take the helmet off. On the Fourth of July the pole was Uncle Sam, on Veteran's Day a soldier, on Halloween a ghost. The pole was Dad's only concession to glee. We were allowed a single Crayola from the box at a time. One Christmas Eve he shrieked at Kimmie for wasting an apple slice. He hovered over us as we poured ketchup saying: good enough good enough good enough. Birthday parties consisted of cupcakes, no ice cream. The first time I brought a date over she said: what's with your dad and that pole? and I sat there blinking.

We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us. Dad began dressing the pole with more complexity and less discernible logic. He draped some kind of fur over it on Groundhog Day and lugged out a floodlight to ensure a shadow. When an earthquake struck Chile he lay the pole on its side and spray painted a rift in the earth. Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby. We'd stop by and find odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theater tickets, old sweatshirts, tubes of Mom's makeup. One autumn he painted the pole bright yellow. He covered it with cotton swabs that winter for warmth and provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard. He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand on index cards. He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and the sticks and left them by the road on garbage day.



George Saunders  
born 1958