

Craft

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“I’m a writer” I assert, but the words sound all wrong to my ears because how can I really be a *writer*, as I say I am, if I type my outpour of language onto a screen and not scrawl it down into some travel weary journal? You know the kind that looks like it’s been dropped down a flight of stairs a couple hundred times and coffee has soaked into the light brown leather, making it look like a clot of mud. The kind that has loose papers jutting out from the side and a crackling, creased closure. “I’m a writer” I declare, but I do not carry a journal around everywhere I go. Sometimes, you may catch me without a simple book. There’s something envious there, about that. A romanticism about what a writer ought to be. We ought to be entrenched in our own minds every waking moment of the day. We ought to be eccentric and stand out from the rest. We ought to be scribbling short-hand nonsense every other second, and jittering from either coffee or the itch for booze. Well maybe there’s some truth to it. I find I do my best writing jazzed out of my mind on caffeine. I cannot drink and write. Drinking makes me foggy, loose, easily distracted, and my attention span is already the worn-out elastic in a four-year-old’s hair tie.

I do my writing at a desk with home brewed drip-coffee (none of that weak Keurig crap) poured into the biggest mug I own. I have fluffy flavored creamer mixed inside. Good creamer is one luxury I will always allow myself to afford. Full of a hefty, presumably healthy meal that I cooked myself, I sit and type away as my coffee cools. You see, I call myself a writer, but really, I ought to call myself an ‘imaginarian’. I spend most of the time I should be writing on thinking. I think about people and whether they mean what they say. I think about attitudes and what it means to stare at something. I think about this time and place and say, “but what if”. I build from the ‘if’ a whole new scenario in my head. Then life goes on. The ‘if’ sits in my head and I carry on. There’s something about the timing of it. Like waiting for a chicken to marinate or for that twenty minutes of perfect sunlight to take the picture. I’m a writer, but most of the time I sit with that ‘if’ in my head until one day I feel in some deeper, unnamed pit of myself ‘it’s about time’. Then I find it in myself to cook my breakfast of eggs in the shape of patties, sautéed asparagus

and mushrooms, and peanut butter toast (or some variation of it). I brew that pot of coffee, mix it, and finally sit at that lonely desk. I sit there, and I type. I type and type as time ticks away because when I write, when I finally write, five hours is just the check point to say ‘maybe I should switch to water or tea’ before I drudge on.

So, say I’m an imaginarian. I think 345 days a year and write maybe the twenty rest. There’s editing scattered in there. It’s hidden under the misjudgment of my gut feeling. I think ‘it’s about time’ and I sit at my desk, but it is not time, and I was wrong, and so, I edit instead. I get immersed in it; combing scrupulously over each line. Grammar, sentence structure, that comes easiest. It’s the bigger picture. The large looming ‘rip me apart and build me back up again’ that is the hardest, and then I become an imaginarian again. I think about how it could be better done, what limbs to sever and what veins to cauterize. I take notes, I highlight, and then I wait again for the big ‘it’s about time’. Writing is like a trauma in that way. You sit on it, process it, play it back behind the curtains of your daily life. In the way you ask yourself if you left the stove on, you come back to it. You pick it apart, see how it makes you feel—wait until it stops making you feel. You live like this until finally you decide you’re ready to begin the healing process; to say, ‘you are not what you once were, but from this I will make you more’.

Then, once more, I am a writer. I sit at my desk in bedtime sweat pants and a long-sleeve winter fleece shirt that my Pop gave me. I’ve repurposed it into my ‘sleepy-time jacket’. I often write while wearing another person’s clothing—acquired one way or another. I am not cold, but it makes my insides warmer. It’s a reminder of what is out there, what is left after I write; what world remains after I have created or destroyed another. I write with instrumental music on. Lyrics, just as television or the radio, they put words in my brain and whisper sweet persuasions on how I ought to make my words bend. They flirt with the voice in my head, my voice, and threaten to over power it. I have always been good at changing how I speak according to who I am speaking to. Some attitudes, tones, slang, feel dominant in different situations, and so, like some shapeshifter, I change. Voices, as I write, threaten to trigger that survival response in me. I begin to write as the character in the show playing behind me, or my prose bleeds into the lyrical cadence of song. Before too long, what I write is no longer a product of me, but a thrift store of humanity beyond what I can understand or control.

I listen to classical music, sometimes the popular brand of ‘low-fi chill step’. Other times I listen to angry dubstep, the kind with distorted alien voices and bass drops the weight of an anvil. Sometimes I listen to experimental instrumental rock—something inherently optimistic and adventurous in sound. I want the emotion of the music to match the world I am in—the feeling in that place I write about. The inflection of the music keeps me immersed. It creates a soundtrack for a story not yet begun—but then again, what better place to start than with music and a feeling?

I find myself rocking my head in time. I get lost in my own chair. Every sentence feels like a step down a long dusty path in an enchanted forest. Every page, every paragraph, I retrace my steps to make sure I remember which way I came from. When I find my way back again, the room is dark. I fall so deep into my chair that I cannot rise again to turn on some lamps as daylight fades. When I find my way back again I am shocked at the time, and the light from my screen makes me question if this is truly the reality I belong in. For a full day—five, seven, nine hours—I lose myself and write.

The rest of the time, I am an imaginarian. “I am an imaginarian” I tell my family, my friends, and they look at me funny. “What is that?” they ask, distrust in their voice. “I think about things” I reply. They shoot back, “So you’re a philosopher?” “No”, I say, “I think about things, and then I imagine them differently. I do this all day long, even when I don’t mean to. It’s more fun that way”. They look at me, taken back, confused, and frightened for me, because an imaginarian is not a profession. It is not even a real word and how sad it must be that I am stuck in this childish place where there is no real use or purpose to be had. “Hah!”, I say, “I was only messing with you. I am a writer”. “Oh!”, they say, their faces clearing from concern into a hesitant relaxation. “Can I read what you’ve written?”.