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Some Thoughts on the Whole Works-in-Progress Thing

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Panel: Works in Progress

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I am a work-in-progress. I think nations are works in progress; hell, humanity is a work in a progress. But these are complicated ideas, ideas that would require more than a quarter of an hour or two and half pages to elucidate. And I, not a psychologist, sociologist, philosopher. I am a novelist. Consequently, I should talk about something more mundane but tangible, something I know: I will talk about process, my process, the process, for instance, that informs my present work-in-progress, a big, bad, bawdy, comic epic set in Karachi that contends with history, historiography, metaphysics, and a hot hermaphrodite.

I think the production of prose is a negligible part of being a writer. If one were to whimsically assign a number to it – the act of putting words together to form sentences, stringing sentences to form paragraphs and so on – it would, by my calculation, be in the 8 to 12% range. Being a writer has more to do with negotiating days, weeks, months, years, negotiating life, summoning discipline, creating an ecosystem that supports the production of prose. It's about managing your head. When you're in the middle of a novel, a work-in-progress, you have to manage your head.

After almost a decade of working in the financial services industry – the imperative of certain destitution and a solid middle class grounding – I found myself unemployed and twiddling my thumbs in Cambridge, MA in the fall of 2003. I had six months of cash and an inchoate idea, doggerel really, which if I remember correctly, I committed to a cocktail napkin at CBGB's (the now defunct mecca of punk rock on the Bowery in New York City). The Ramones got started there in August 1974 (possibly on the day I was born), and *Home Boy*, my debut novel was born there one drunken night in October 2003: when I retrieved said napkin from my pocket several weeks later, and transcribed verse to paper, I found the material would require more than a poem to unpack.

For the next four years, I wrote until six every morning, woke at two in the afternoon, took breakfast at three, worked from three-thirty to six thirty, then napped for an hour before returning to the manuscript from nine to eleven in the evening. I would have lunch at eleven thirty at night then write till six again. It didn't happen immediately. It took time for me to figure it out, to figure out how get myself to produce three, maybe four hundred words a day. After all, although I have been writing since I was five or six, I never had had to think about sustaining a project of this scale. And it wasn't as if I was writing *War and Peace*.

Like any writer, I had to learn how to solve problems, how to edit, when to take a break, when to read. I learned to trick myself to write on days I wouldn't have been able to write otherwise, promising myself, for instance, a cigarette, a drink, a pair of cowboy boots (which I could only afford when I sold the novel).

Halfway through *Home Boy*, however, the tricks stopped working. There was a three month period during which I religiously adhered to my schedule but didn't write a single word. I was up till six every morning, sometimes seven or eight, and I woke at two in the afternoon, sometimes three or four. I sat for three sessions but had nothing to show for myself. I had dug a hole; and I was deep in it. I had to learn to crawl out of it using my fingers. I still have dirt in my fingernails from that fraught period.

Then there was the time when my back gave way. For six months, I had brittle pain in the muscle in my lower back and the meat of my thigh. I had no health insurance. From 2003 to 2007, I made about \$11,000, net of taxes, teaching as a lecturer at Boston University. I remember saving fifty bucks to pay a yoga instructor, an amicable middle-aged lady who wore bright baggy clothes, to clap over my back like a windup brass monkey. It had something to do with force fields. It didn't work. I took over-the-counter medication, Tylenol and Bufferin and then one day said, the hell with this, and started doing pushups. I began with three, four, and over a period of a month, worked up to hundred. To this day, I manage about a hundred pushups a night. I recommend it.

Tricks, drugs – mostly over-the-counter – and pushups got me through *Home Boy*. Now, I am forty-one pages into my next project which is not much but considering it took me about four years to complete *Home Boy*, a 250 page book, it's not bad. There's no certainty, however, that I will be able to manage my head in the same way that I was able to while writing *Home Boy*. I have been able to make meaningful progress on it here in Iowa City, Iowa, and though it's been going well, I don't know if returning to Karachi, being displaced, will affect my process.

Karachi is a wonderfully frenetic city, one of the largest in the world. On a good day, you could fit Denmark, Israel, Moldova and Austria in it and have room to spare for Iowa City, Iowa. There is always traffic on the streets; families are cavorting on the beach at midnight during the week. You can get a beer in the city at one in the morning, breakfast at half past four. It's often difficult to shut out the noise.

In any event, I can stand before an audience, lean on a lectern, and talk about process with certain bravado. It might sound heroic but it's not. I am not a scientist or a doctor or an activist. I am a mere novelist. I will remain a work-in-progress.