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On Writing in This Moment

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I'm a fiction writer and can only speak to the experience of writing imaginatively in this moment, a moment, in ways, stranger than what I write. My writing process is a combination of pulling from experience and making things up, and to do this, I need to be in the mood to tell my imagined audience a story. And I need to feel that this imagined audience is entirely focused on me.

I had a book come out last semester, and I don't currently have a deadline. I'm in a place where I can think about my future writing project, which in other times would feel like a luxury. But in a moment in which every small thing takes hours, a moment in which my mood depends on what I've just read or who needs what or what sounds are around me, I'm not thinking of writing as much. So, when I was asked to speak about writing in this moment, I thought, Why do I need to write in this moment? I want to ask: Why do you need to write in this moment? If your answer is that you do have a deadline, or you're deep in a project, that's good, because perhaps you have a distraction from the pandemic, a thing to focus on that may not be the pandemic, and then the pandemic becomes a lens, and not the thing at the center. In fiction workshop we call this the *situation*. It's running in the background of the story, but it's not the story itself. If you're in this position, my advice is to write as if nothing else is going on. To remember your writing was important before the pandemic, it's important now, and it'll be more important after.

But if your answer to the question is—as it is for me—that you have to write in this moment because you like to write or you need to write or writing keeps you sane, then I would ask two more questions: What do you need to write in this moment? And to whom, in this moment, are you writing?

I used to think I wrote just for myself, that I was my most important audience. This is what we would tell ourselves in grad school, and perhaps back then, not having published much, it was true. There was no promise then of anyone reading my stuff outside of workshop. Though likely I was in denial about my audience, because I now know there are always people to whom I'm speaking when I write, whether real or imagined, living or not. I visited a colleague's class last week and talked about this imagined audience. I said they're often a panel of my toughest critics, people I know or have known, for writing for me is often a confrontation, a type of revenge, a way to stare down pain and the people who cause it, and turn it into stories. And I wonder if that's something I can even access in this moment. I wonder if I can convince myself this audience even cares.

When the shelter-in-place started, I was on a month-long retreat as a visiting writer at a college in Minnesota. I was staying in a monastery guest house, and already quite isolated. I was writing more those weeks than I'd written since my book came out, sitting alone in this gigantic church. Actually, I wasn't the only one in the church. There was a

guy who was building a new section to the pipe organ, and the sounds it made me think of horror movies, of which I am a fan. Against this backdrop, I could easily fall into that place of wanting to tell a story, to be who I needed to be to travel to imagined places in my head. Then the virus was spreading across the country, the school went online, the students went home, and my faculty host said I should rent a car in case I needed to get out quickly, or in case he got sick. Then the guest house shut down, and the monks said I could stay as long as I wanted, though I would be completely alone. I decided to stay, and I think I would still be there if my editor hadn't called to say I should consider going home. Travel was becoming difficult, he said, and he was worried I wouldn't get back. He thought I might want to be with family or friends during this time. But actually, I didn't. I wanted to stay where I was. I needed that kind of solitude. I think this says something about what I need in order to write, not just in this moment, but in all moments. Sheltering in a place is something I do well. But sheltering in *my* place isn't.

I came back to San Francisco on a terrifying travel day that might be worth writing years from now: something about the surreal drive through snowy Minnesota, and how hard I was crying, and the tent I made out of my coat to sit under on the nearly empty plane.

I can tell you I have no interest now in reading anyone's writing about the pandemic. I truly don't want to read someone else's version of what has taken over every aspect of my life. I told one of the deans that I would use this panel to say, Don't write.

I think I'm trying to differentiate between the writing we do for ourselves and the writing we do for others. I can write in my notebook about an experience I'm in. But I can't usually write for others until the experience is over. The good thing is you don't have to share your writing.

My friends who are thriving during this time are the ones whose lives have changed the least. Some say their lives have improved. It's their same lives but without a commute. Some have escaped to second homes. But my friends who are struggling the most are the ones who have given up those small things that make each day a gift. You find out what those things are during a moment like this.

Some of my books started out as projects I'd abandoned. When I abandon a project, it means it's too soon to for me to write it. When I was in college, two girls in my class were killed in the Lockerbie plane crash. I was in art school, and this was what I painted about, and obsessively. Though when I started writing, a few years later, I couldn't write about it. And I couldn't write about it for almost twenty-five more years, and I'm still not convinced I've said enough.

I think some moments are just the experience and not the telling of them. This moment, for me, right now, is an experience. I feel fully in it, and who knows how long it'll last. I'm only writing about it now because someone asked me to. I wouldn't have written this on my own. When the experience is over, perhaps I'll have more to say.