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ESSAY C: WHAT WRITING MEANS TO ME

A meditation on the importance, the absolute necessity, the pure, first person plural, of writing

In the morning, waiting for the bus with those people we love or cannot stand, we're watching, we're listening for what all of us together might mean. And always there's a shiver of excitement as the dots shift, and we try to connect them. At our jobs, the ones we keep for money, our fingertips buzz in anticipation of what they'll type out later. The zing of creation gives the whole day its mood.

We sit down, finally, late at night when everyone is asleep, and we're tired, but it's so still in the house, and quiet in a way it never is any other time, and we hit a power switch—just the name of that button, *power switch*—and we type out what we're thinking, the memory of our day. Everything clicks out in a rhythm like the sound of steps leaving a bus stop. Like everyone walking off to take up their part in all this. A cast emerges. The woman who never speaks, who wears white cotton gloves: why? The man with the wool beret who keeps the flask in his briefcase. Where does he go when he gets off the bus? And the bold girl with half a finger missing. What happened there?

When all the sharp daylight falls away, we type out what mustn't be forgotten. We give the words a rhythm, a beat that pulses at the back of our thoughts all the next day as we walk down cracked sidewalks, as we pay for postage at small windows. On the bus we are watching, listening to the dum-te-dum-te-dum of stories playing out at the edge of our thoughts.

We write to say, *You are not alone*. We write the thing that can't be said, that no one wants to remember, the thing that will be a bright moment for a stranger, the way another's writing was a bright moment for us. Ah ha! We tell our part of the story; we recreate the view from our window. We pass what we have to those who are hungry for it because we, ourselves, have been hungry.

We write because we can't not. We write because it's how we're made. We are she who longs for the room of her own. She who knows that Rose is a rose is a rose. She who drank from the well of loneliness. She Who. She who dives into the wreck. She whose color was purple. She of the joy luck club. She, the bastard out of Carolina. All of us at the keyboard. All of us writing it out. The painful moment. The ecstatic moment. The moment of held breath, that sublime moment of a leaf at the edge of a pool. It's ours to watch, that leaf, to hold our breath and wait. To see it float over and be gone. And then to remember.

The typing at night. The steady dum-te-dum-te-dum of the words of others sifted through the screen of who we are. In the stillness, in the dreamy stillness, we spin ourselves out into the big night, free of all that weighs us down. Free from the world of difference and sameness. We make what we need out of words. We make a world and fill it with those we love, with those we cannot stand, with those we know and those we never will. It is easy to make the words come out of the mouths of those we love. We know the why of them. The why of those we do not understand is what we must learn, and we write to learn it. There in the stillness, in the night, we have the freedom to wonder at last, *Isn't the why of all of us the same?* The words of all of us are the same. The dum-te-dum-te-dum of everyone dreaming.

We write for those who are not like us, whose dreams have a different beat. The wool beret, the flask, the half-finger, the gloves. The white cotton gloves. In the morning, waiting for the bus, we stand in the same place, though every

day it's a little different because writing changes it. On the bus we study the man with the beret, and we wonder what he did with his evening and how long that flask has been with him. And why. *Why?* The silent woman in her cotton gloves. We have begun to think of her bare hands against a lover's cheek. And the girl with the half finger. See how she doesn't tuck it out of sight? She points it at everything, at a flock of wild parrots dipping their green wings against the sky-blue sky, making us all gasp at the unexpected grace. And the bus is not a bus at all, but a mind meld, some sort of 3-D collective unconscious. And writing is the way we make sense of it. Even now we're thinking about it. Even before our money-making jobs. Here on the bus we are already storing the dum-te-dum-te-dum of our day.

Without the crackle of the keyboard, the she who, the bus. Without the quiet, the stillness, the place of writing. Without these things the world is the color of dust and all of us are strangers and always will be. Without writing, the dots stay unconnected, the days, unrelated. And all the meaning is lost moment to moment to moment.

Everything depends on the stories we have heard, the ones we've told and how. When we slump at our desks in the stillness, tired and pounded flat by our days, it's the writing that brings us back to life. We're never alone there. We are all, the whole busload of us, gathered around the warm glow of the computer screen, listening to the dum-te-dum-te-dum, the musical benediction of the keyboard.
