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Orientation:
Who do you think you are?
What is "a writer," and how did I become one?

. . . a colony lacks the spiritual energy to rise above routine, and . . . it lacks this energy because it does not adequately believe in itself . . . It sets the great good place not in its present, nor in its past nor in its future, but somewhere outside its own borders, somewhere beyond its own possibilities . . . A great art is fostered by artists and audience possessing in common a passionate and peculiar interest in the kind of life that exists in the country where they live.

E. K. Brown, "The Problem of a Canadian Literature" (1943)[1]

. . . if you should throw a poetry contest with a prize big enough to attract five hundred poets . . . you might feel that putting them all together you'd arrive at the typical Canadian maker. When you have finished reading the five hundred poems what you find is that about three people have come close to getting the thing, I mean they know how to write poetry professionally . . . After these three you get about two hundred metrical smoothies without a metaphor in their bones and then three hundred metrical hobblers . . . Flying in and out of this mass are three or four poems brilliant and eerie and spine-chilling because these are the poems of mad people . . . This analysis of the five hundred Canadian poets fills me with gloom because it represents the grass

roots poet, poetry reader, and average sensitive citizen in this country and he is just not very literary at all.

James Reaney, "The Canadian Poet's Predicament" (1957)[2]

The Canadian poet has all the models in the language (not to mention other languages) at his disposal, but lacks the deadening awareness that he is competing with them.

Milton Wilson, "Other Canadians and After" (1958)[3]

– it seemed that I had to be a writer as well as a reader. I bought a school notebook and tried to write – did write, pages that started off authoritatively and then went dry, so that I had to tear them out and twist them up in hard punishment and put them in the garbage can. I did this over and over again until I had only the notebook cover left. Then I bought another notebook and started the whole process once more. The same cycle – excitement and despair, excitement and despair.

Alice Munro, "Cortes Island" (1999)[4]

Writing, Writers, The Writing Life – if this last is not an oxymoron. Is this subject like the many-headed Hydra, which grows two other subtexts as soon as you demolish one? Or is it more like Jacob's nameless angel, with whom you must wrestle until he blesses you? Or is it like Proteus, who must be firmly grasped through all his changes? Hard to get hold of, certainly. Where to start? At the end called Writing, or the end called The Writer? With the gerund or the noun, the activity or the one performing it? And where exactly does one stop and the other begin?

In the novel *The Woman in the Dunes*,[5] by the Japanese writer Kobo Abé, a man called Nikki finds himself trapped against his will at the bottom of a huge sandpit, along with a solitary woman, where he is forced to shovel away the sand that keeps sifting down on them. To comfort himself in his hopeless predicament, he considers writing about his ordeal. "Why couldn't he observe things in a more self-possessed way? If and when he got back safely it would certainly be well worthwhile setting down this experience."

Then a second voice enters his head, and he begins a dialogue with it.

"' – Well, Nikki . . . '" it says. "'At last you have decided to write something. It really was the experience that made you . . . '"

"' – Thanks. Actually I've got to think up some kind of title.'"

You see, Nikki has already slipped into the role of writer – he recognizes the importance of *the title*. A few steps more and he'd be pondering the cover design. But he soon loses confidence, and declares that no matter how he tries, he's not fit to be a writer. The second voice then reassures him: "'There's no need for you to think of writers as something special. If you write, you're a writer, aren't you?'"

Apparently not, says Nikki. "'Saying you want to become a writer is no more than egotism; you want to distinguish between yourself and the puppets by making yourself a puppeteer.'"

The voice says this is too severe. "'. . . certainly you should be able to distinguish . . . between being a writer and writing.'"

"' – Ah. You see!'" says Nikki. "'That's the very reason I wanted to become a writer. If I couldn't be a writer there would be no particular need to write!'"

Writing – the setting down of words – is an ordinary enough activity, and according to Nikki's second voice there's nothing very mysterious about it. Anyone literate can take implement in hand and make marks on a flat surface. *Being a writer*, however, seems to be a socially acknowledged role, and one that carries some sort of weight or impressive significance – we hear a capital W on *Writer*. Nikki's reason for wanting to write is that

he wants the status – he wants to cut a figure in society. But happy the writer who begins simply with the activity itself – the defacement of blank pieces of paper – without having first encountered the socially acknowledged role. It is not always a particularly blissful or fortunate role to find yourself saddled with, and it comes with a price; though, like many roles, it can lend a certain kind of power to those who assume the costume.

But the costume varies. Every child is born, not only to specific parents, within a specific language and climate and political situation, but also into a preexisting matrix of opinions about children – whether they should be seen and not heard, whether sparing the rod spoils them, whether they should be praised every day so they won't develop negative self-esteem, and so forth. So also it is with writers. No writer emerges from childhood into a pristine environment, free from other people's biases about writers. All of us bump up against a number of preconceptions about what we are or ought to be like, what constitutes good writing, and what social functions writing fulfills, or ought to fulfill. All of us develop our own ideas about what we are writing in relation to these preconceptions. Whether we attempt to live up to them, rebel against them, or find others using them to judge us, they affect our lives as writers.

I myself grew up in a society that, at first glance, might have seemed to lack any such preconceptions. Certainly writing and art were not the foremost topics of daily conversation in Canada when I was born – in 1939, two and

a half months after the outbreak of World War II. People had other things on their minds, and even if they hadn't, they wouldn't have been thinking about writers. In a magazine article published nine years later entitled "Canadians Can Read, But Do They?" the poet Earle Birney claimed that most Canadians had only three hardcover books in the house: the Bible, the works of Shakespeare, and Fitzgerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

My parents were both from Nova Scotia, a province from which they felt themselves in exile all their lives. My father was born in 1906, and was the son of a backwoods farmer. His mother had been a schoolteacher, and it was she who encouraged my father to educate himself – through correspondence courses, there being no high school within reach. He then went to Normal School, taught primary school, saved the money from that, got a scholarship, worked in lumber camps, lived in tents during the summers, cooked his own food, cleaned out rabbit hutches at a low wage, managed at the same time to send enough money "home" to put his three sisters through high school, and ended up with a doctorate in Forest Entomology. As you might deduce, he believed in self-sufficiency, and Henry David Thoreau was one of the writers he admired.

My mother's father was a country doctor of the kind that drove a sleigh and team through blizzards to deliver babies on kitchen tables. She herself was a tomboy who loved riding horses and ice-skating, had scant use for housework, walked barn ridgepoles, and practiced her piano

pieces – since various efforts were made to turn her into a lady – with a novel open on her knees. My father saw her sliding down a banister at Normal School and decided then and there that she was the girl he would marry.

By the time I was born, my father was running a tiny forest-insect research station in northern Québec. Every spring my parents would take off for the North; every autumn, when the snow set in, they would return to a city – usually to a different apartment each time. At the age of six months, I was carried into the woods in a packsack, and this landscape became my hometown.

The childhoods of writers are thought to have something to do with their vocation, but when you look at these childhoods they are in fact very different. What they often contain, however, are books and solitude, and my own childhood was right on track. There were no films or theatres in the North, and the radio didn't work very well. But there were always books. I learned to read early, was an avid reader and read everything I could get my hands on – no one ever told me I couldn't read a book. My mother liked quietness in children, and a child who is reading is very quiet.

Because none of my relatives were people I could actually see, my own grandmothers were no more and no less mythological than Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother, and perhaps this had something to do with my eventual writing life – the inability to distinguish between the real and the imagined, or rather the attitude that what we consider real is also imagined: every life lived is also an inner life, a life created.

A good many writers have had isolated childhoods; a good many have also had storytellers in their lives. My primal storyteller was my brother; at first I featured only as audience, but soon was allowed to join in. The rule was that you kept going until you ran out of ideas or just wanted a turn at being the listener. Our main saga involved a race of supernatural animals that lived on a distant planet. An ignorant person might have mistaken these for rabbits, but they were ruthless carnivores and could fly through the air. These stories were adventures: war, weapons, enemies and allies, hidden treasure, and daring escapes were the main features.

Stories were for twilight, and when it was raining; the rest of the time, life was brisk and practical. There was very little said about moral and social misdemeanors – we didn't have much opportunity for them. We did get instructions about avoiding lethal stupidity – don't set forest fires, don't fall out of boats, don't go swimming in thunderstorms – that sort of thing. Because my father built everything – the cabins we lived in, our furniture, boat docks, and so forth – we had free access to hammers, saws, rasps, drills, brace-and-bits, and dangerous edged tools of every kind, and we played with them a lot. Eventually we were taught the sensible way to clean a gun (take the bullets out first, don't look down the barrel from the front end) and how to kill a fish quickly (knife blade between the eyes). Squeamishness and whining were not encouraged; girls were not expected to do more of it than boys; crying was not viewed with indulgence. Rational debate was smiled upon, as was curiosity about almost everything.

But deep down I was not a rationalist. I was the youngest and weepiest of the family, frequently sent for naps due to fatigue, and thought to be sensitive and even a bit sickly; perhaps this was because I showed an undue interest in sissy stuff like knitting and dresses and stuffed bunnies. My own view of myself was that I was small and innocuous, a marshmallow compared to the others. I was a poor shot with a 22, for instance, and not very good with an ax. It took me a long time to figure out that the youngest in a family of dragons is still a dragon from the point of view of those who find dragons alarming.

I was five in 1945, when the War ended and balloons and colored comics returned. This was a time when I began to have more to do with cities, and with other people. The postwar housing boom was underway, and the house we now lived in was one of the new split-level boxes. My bedroom was painted a soft peach, which was a first – no other bedroom I'd ever slept in had had paint on the walls. I also went to school for the first time, during the winter months. Having to sit at a desk all day made me tired, and I was sent for more naps than ever.

Around the age of seven I wrote a play. The protagonist was a giant; the theme was crime and punishment; the crime was lying, as befits a future novelist; the punishment was being squashed to death by the moon. But who was to perform this masterpiece? I couldn't be all the characters at once. My solution was puppets. I made the characters out of paper, and a stage from a cardboard box.

This play was not a raging success. As I recall, my brother and his pals came in and laughed at it, thus giving me an early experience of literary criticism. I stopped

writing plays, and began a novel; but I never got past the opening scene, in which the main character – an ant – was being swept downriver on a raft. Perhaps the demands of a longer form were too much for me. In any case I stopped writing then, and forgot all about it. I took to painting instead, and drawing pictures of fashionable ladies, smoking cigarettes in holders and wearing fancy gowns and very high heels.

When I was eight we moved again, to another postwar bungalow, this time nearer the center of Toronto, at that time a stodgy provincial city of seven hundred thousand. I was now faced with real life, in the form of other little girls – their prudery and snobbery, their Byzantine social life based on whispering and vicious gossip, and an inability to pick up earthworms without wriggling all over and making mewing noises like a kitten. I was more familiar with the forthright mindset of boys: the rope burn on the wrist and the dead-finger trick were familiar to me – but little girls were almost an alien species. I was very curious about them, and remain so.

By now it was the late 1940s. Women, no longer required for wartime production, had been herded back into the home, and the Baby Boom was on: marriage and four kids were the ideal, and remained so for the next fifteen years. Canada was such a cultural backwater that we didn't get the full force of this ideology – there were still some adventurous Amelia Earhart types left over, still some bluestockings, still some independent and even radical women who'd come through the thirties and forties and had always supported themselves; but smoothly run domesticity was the approved trend.