theories and methodologies

Writing, Life

KATHLEEN STEWART

ONCE, I NEEDED THE PERFECT TIME AND PLACE TO WRITE. I STOOD IN MY OWN WAY, AFFECTING THE DANGERS OF WORLDS AND AUDIENCES.

It was as if to write was to write a poison-pen letter to myself and everything else. Then, slowly, under the velocities of worldly pressures, I learned to write in my own skin, like it or not. Making money, making dinner, taking care of things, having problems, having encounters, having a body, getting into swimming, or Deleuze, or fish tacos, or the habit of gazing at houses online, I ended up with a writer's life. I learned to write in thirty-minute intervals on my frail mother's dining-room table, my three-year-old playing with the remnants of old plastic toys underfoot. I took notes on my phone at a doctor's office. I started the day by writing in bed, even when I only had ten minutes. The matters of life became the matters of words. In writing, life, frictions scrape across the surfaces of both registers, pulling them into lines of form and force. Freighted and propelled, writing knots up on what crosses its path in a bit of social chaos or in a back turned on someone. Like a readiness in need of a start, it feels out what's happening or waits for the recomposition of a tendon snapping back.

Writers interviewed say you just do it every day. I think that's a little tongue in cheek and what they mean is something like this: a writer first composes the fiction of a world of writing and then turns it into a routine of the self. They say you write *x* hours a day and the rest of the day is just filler; you go for coffee, you give a lecture, you do e-mail, you take a walk, you stare out that window. You stop being the thing that stops you by becoming the scene of a writing muscle's interval training; you write, then it's recuperative downtime so you can write again. You become singular and on point, opening yourself to writing's imperial promise and demand.

I would put it a little differently. Maybe something like this: if you let it, writing pushes everything (writer in tow) into an energetic state. It starts as a jumping-off point on the lookout for something suggestive. Then it magnetizes attributes and trajectories. It wraps the concept in atmospherics. Capacities poise in its objects. Thought

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ne . Leaning into a world already populated by prolific, hardworking compositions, it fastens onto the tendons of a scene or the interruption of a rhythm. The act of writing saturates itself in a variegated poiesis already charged with experiments of form and matter. It's a sensitivity cocreating with termites and claws, snuggles and walks, death and car trouble and a certain look.

For me, as I have said, writing happened under worldly pressure. It became my self-declared job to describe the legibilities that things in contact yield, to notice a habit forming up or the sudden cohesion of a milieu. I would drag whatever worldly compositions I'd light upon into a catchment area, a teeming pond of possibilities, an occasional water bug skimming its surface. Its saturated act induced ordinary speculation out of the noise of kids, marijuana, dancing, driving, other people's addictions, and all the things that happen in meetings.

Writing makes things feel full—at once actual and potential. What matters to writing is the swell of an overfilled form or the way something becomes perceptible and muffles other things. Working with words is like feeling out the pitch of a note made by an imaginary tuning fork. When writing fails, it spins out like a car in loose sand, leaving you stranded and itchy. When it works, it ricochets off subjects and objects in a connection like a spark or a membrane.

Over time things happen to a writing, life. For me, writing became necessarily recursive. Every day I started at the beginning, chiseling at things that were neither here nor there. I came to listen, primarily, for the sound and rhythm of the words. I became impatient with the shorthand that reduced the precise singularities of things to exempla of ideas claiming transcendence. I became allergic to the long-winded and roundabout: the arguments, the anxious attempts to circle around a thing instead of trying to get it. I was after some precision of skill or timing in the billowing folds of things, some iterability, some expressivity in ordinary things. My questions got more and more basic, and they were not about meaning, causality, or right and wrong but, What is it? What's it doing now? I wanted to keep going, to complete the thought of a tendency or the shade of an opening.

Sometimes people who know something, viscerally, about the subject of something I'm writing will accuse me of letting out secrets, of writing down things that people living through them recognize and know in certain ways but only to an extent and don't talk about. In a stronger version of this, an aunt once leaned into me and said, not kindly, "You better not be writing about the family." Some academics object to the way I mix composition and theory because they like their fiction on the side or they want to know what they're reading when it comes to academic prose. Even though I care a lot about reactions to my writing, I'm *with* the writing.

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Writing, now, we might find ourselves caught up in something we're composing, like music or a conversation that's taken hold. Right now, we're decades into the mean, lean neoliberal policies that blew up inequality like a balloon and turned class and race into castes and normative gender into a hollowed-out horror show. The social is under so much pressure it has an attitude problem about its own existence, and in more and more ordinary situations people find the existence of others unbearable. Yet the engine of the everyday now is a sheer inquiry into what others are doing and what they know. "How'd you get into *that*?" "What *is* that?" Surprise flourishes now not just because of all the conspiracies and occluded zones but because things hit at such a specific angle, already in precise form, that they activate a noticing competency and the impulse to be *in* what you didn't even know existed until just now. You can be contaminated by a pause or a tic in your mood. Social-aesthetic-material fragments are languishing all around, ungathered by logics of politics, of meaning, or of blame.

Writing, now, is like catching your breath. A time-out scanning the surface of what's going on for a place to begin. Words touch bodies and things, light on what might unfold, nudge a line of composition for good or bad. It's prolific, multimodal, a matter of timing or tone, consequential and laboring. How did the hipster hat become a thing? How exactly did it happen that a city's bus drivers suddenly refused to make stops in a poor black neighborhood or that a gang of white middle school boys in a liberal town in New England decided to be bad at the start of summer vacation by chanting "white power" from the raft on the lake? When did teenagers start living off DIY *YouTube* videos to see how to bake things, make things, do their nails? How did they come to think that *this* is how you enter the world or that this is world enough for them?

Note

Below is a list of some of the things I was thinking with as I was writing.

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