

The Write Place at the Write Time

Home

About Us

Announcements

Insights of Interviewees

Fiction

Poetry

"Our Stories" non-fiction

Writers' Craft Box

Submission Guidelines

Feedback & Questions

Artists' Gallery

Indie Bookstores

Literary Arts Patrons

Scrapbook of Eight Years

Archives

Inscribing Industry Blog

Come in...and be captivated...

 Search


Insights of Interviewees

Come—come take a seat and rest amongst friends. We have a place for you here. We knew you'd be coming, knew you'd be weary from the journey of the past few months that it's taken to get here. We're ready to welcome you with a warm embrace, whether friend or stranger. We realize the hunger for all that can and cannot be named in these uncertain times, and so we've prepared as best we know how, a feast of words to share. We're aware of the

diverse appetites out there—individual tastes, needs, and wants—so there is an abundant array to choose from. Every dish needn't be your favorite, but having worked with fine, fresh ingredients, we're confident that you'll find things your soul craves. Sit back, sample, and savor. Let us all push the tables together and talk about everything until we're satiated, until we understand what we need to about one another and the world. Come.

Taking on the task of creating an issue that would strive to both ask the right questions and offer some of the "write" answers, we wanted to involve voices of past interview subjects. We are incredibly fortunate to have an archive full of great minds. Below we have best-sellers, instructors, and award-winners in a dynamic grouping of eight authors: Erica Bauermeister, Janet Fitch, Gwendolen Gross, Frances Mayes, Thomas C. Foster, Alice Hoffman, Don Wallace, and Renée Ashley. We asked them for their time, their thoughts, their reactions, their outlooks, their feelings, their wisdom, their input. We asked them to speak to you. They're here. They are here during their own deadlines, during their travels, during their busy schedules to sit with you. The way people have come together for this issue has moved us, a heartening contrast to the divisiveness we're all hearing of and/or experiencing.

You will read responses in the form of statements, answers to questions, personal essays, and exercises for you to try. Discover what resonates.

We discuss using our individual and collective voices to sing the beauty of our truth. We excavate a deeper connection to humanity and a stronger, empathic awareness of the struggles of others. We honor the need to step outside to go within, recognizing that we are never alone as we walk upon "the same storied earth." We are reminded to contribute to our communities, expanding the circle of positive actions ever-outward. We are invited to look at different perspectives with the purpose of remembering to see people instead of just views. We mend our sails in the safe harbor of a journal page. We use art as a life compass to find our way forward. Finally, we find the light in the shadow of fear and, sorting through chaotic tangles of emotion, we make room for what *does* fit us.

May the offerings we have gathered here for you nourish and restore you. May you rise from the table with hope, inspiration, an expanded, receptive palate, and the knowledge that there is always a seat for you.

With Erica Bauermeister we discuss drawing out our voices, singing our truths, finding foundations of the past to build upon for new generations, and the desire to help "change the world with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, one beautiful beating-heart word at a time." We speak of women of the ages and how the time to show the world "just how beautiful and powerful [our] thoughts can be" has arrived.

Erica Bauermeister is the best-selling author of three novels: *The School of Essential Ingredients*, *Joy for Beginners*, and *The Lost Art of Mixing*. She is the co-author of *500 Great Books by Women: A Readers' Guide* and *Let's Hear it for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14*. She holds a PhD from the University of Washington.

“Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.” —Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

To me it is a thing of wonder—that a woman who died before I was born wrote down thoughts that speak to me now, and give me strength and hope and inspiration. I read her words and I want us all to pull our voices out of the bricks and mortar, the curtains and the dishcloths and the bed sheets we wash, the food we prepare, the miles we drive to jobs we love or hate. I want us to sing our truths in the town square. I want us to write poetry that cracks ceilings, and novels that break hearts open. I want us to write songs of understanding that we can sing to children so they will grow up with the rhythms in their blood. I want us to write letters—real letters, on paper, and tell someone else a secret so hard or precious or strange that we didn't even know there were words to tell it. I want us to write speeches, and representatives, and pen pals we've never met and tell them who we are.

I want us to change the world with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, one beautiful beating-heart word at a time. It's time.

And to those who say they are tired, that we've fought this battle before, I say that's what the words are for. Because you never stop fighting, or writing. We always build on the words that came before us, just as our words will provide the foundation for the future. Virginia Woolf did it for us—now it is our turn. Go show the world just how beautiful and powerful your thoughts can be.

With Janet Fitch, we let our art breathe through us, exhaling all we're taking in during these days. We approach with curiosity, compassion, and tenderness, the plights of others. We "remember that the mere practice of art, the inner freedom to imagine and empathize, expresses the spark of divine humanity and adds to the freedom of the world."

Janet Fitch is the best-selling author of *White Oleander*, made into the 2002 film directed by Peter Kosminsky, and *Paint it Black*, made into the 2016 film directed by Amber Tamblyn which is scheduled to hit theaters this spring. She has taught fiction writing in the University of Southern California's Master of Professional Writing program, at UCLA Extension Writer's Program, at the AROHO Residency, and at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers summer writing conference. She's lectured at the UCR Palm Desert Low Residency MFA and Antioch Low Residency MFA programs, and the Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA in Writing and Publishing.

Living in "Interesting Times"

Oddly enough, I've spent the last ten years writing a novel set during the Russian Revolution, that time of almost unimaginable change—and now, in a strange way, my novel has caught up with me. We discover that we too are riding on the back of this out of control horse called History. We don't have the reins in our hands. Panic sets in, and the gloom of learning things about our fellow man we didn't want to know. We thought we were going in another direction. How to write in times of such upheaval? What do I have to contribute, I ask myself daily. How can I continue to create when darkness oppresses me so, and depression wraps me in a cold heaviness. What could I possibly have to say?

The important thing to remember is that we need the full variety of voices and experiences and styles of response now. Not everyone is a political writer. Yes, some of us will be stimulated to take this moment head-on. They will write about this moment, they will react immediately to its obvious threats. But others take more time to absorb the magnitude of the changes, and that too will emerge in our work. A new tenderness perhaps, a new gravity, a new respect for the struggles of others, a new awareness.

You cannot live through a period like this and not be absorbing it daily. We are, for better or worse, living in "interesting times," and as writers, our purpose here is to absorb and pull through. You don't have to force it, you don't have to be a particular kind of writer. We just have to not let our

impressions sit within us like an undigested meal, souring us. We must continue to work, allow it to influence what we do, subtly or not, and let it appear on the page as it will.

These responses will take a thousand forms, a hundred thousand. Some will turn to surrealism, because they cannot make sense of the world anymore, it's bizarre and fragmented, with people speaking in "alternative facts" and saying up is down and down is up. Others will write quiet realistic stories about ordinary people trying to live their lives in the face of uncertainty. Some will address the social and political upheaval by embodying its issues in various characters in conflict. There's no way to tell how it will come through you. The only thought I have is, be curious. Let it through.

I believe that, although the outward situation changes, the human condition remains. Our needs—love, loss, struggle, the search for meaning and identity and dignity—don't change over time, whether times are hard or times are good. Only the externals change. Work deep and you will emerge with something vital.

Never stop believing that Art is something essential. The human spirit is indomitable. Art is a war against dehumanization. Art prevents people from projecting their fears onto some shadowy Other—because it allows us to see the Other as ourselves.

So when I feel the great gloom descend, and wonder why should I do this anymore—I remember that the mere practice of art, the inner freedom to imagine and empathize, expresses the spark of divine humanity and adds to the freedom of the world. It gives people the heart to continue their struggle. It shows the dignity of humankind—which is never free of struggle. Despots fear the internal life, they fear art because it stimulates people's recognition of the commonality of all human beings.

If one good thing comes out of this Pandora's box that History has seen fit to tear open right now, it may be that it brings us closer to the suffering of others, makes them more real, and whatever we write now—quick or slow, tragic or comic, overtly political or not—will be a response. Witness, feel, and allow yourself to pull it through yourself into your art.

With Gwendolen Gross, we step outside to go within, observe poignant reminders in nature, take in the world through the dual-lens of poetry and prose, and discover through our words that we are never alone, as "we're all walking on the same storied earth."

Gwendolen Gross is the author of five critically acclaimed novels, including *The Orphan Sister* and *When She Was Gone* from Simon and Schuster. She possesses an MFA in fiction and poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and was chosen early in her career for the PEN West Emerging Writers Program. Gwendolen is an award-winning writing instructor, and has led workshops at Sarah Lawrence College and the UCLA Extension online.

There are some stories
I won't tell; I'd rather the
River Kingfisher.

I probably love him so much because he's like the kookaburra, and reminds me of field science, when I learned to be alone. This is something we don't have enough of—outside, quiet, but all the noises too—the burr of wind against grasses, one tree worrying another. The kookaburra laughs at you, but the belted kingfisher desperately defends the river, darting back and forth across the gray and screaming, "Mine, mine, mine!" He reminds me of now.

It's okay. I want to tell us all it's okay. I don't believe it, but I will. I will believe it for you, because the kingfisher defends this small space against the ducks and dogs, against the hawk and fox, against the wind and water itself until his voice is hoarse. Then he's gone, and the water is still there. He is small and bigheaded. He is lonely. He was here last year and he'll be here again. I was here last year and I'll be here again, walking my dog along the river, looking up at the sky against the hundred year old sycamore and willing words to matter.

When I was in graduate school, my poetry mentor, Thomas Lux, a generous and brilliant poet, who passed away recently on February 5th, told me I'd have to decide whether to be a poet or a proser. To honor him, let's all not decide whether to be poets or proser—let's all find poetry, and in poetry, resist the ordinary, resist and love the ordinary, make it more by finding the best words, the closest words, the words that make it more than it is and exactly what it is. I challenge you, along with all the things you're doing to try to save the world, to be in the world and to observe it, to listen to it

today and write down what you hear and compare what you hear to something that means something just to you. To bring us closer, to make us want to hear your stories.

Then I dare you to be a proser, too, because I am that also, dear Tom, wonderful Tom, who was generous with everyone. I dare you to write down your stories in full, but then, to be both: pare your stories to only the words that are necessary. Honor Tom; read poems (especially his poem about the refrigerator and maraschino cherries) be a poet, and a proser. And a warrior, too.

Be the kingfisher, and then fly on and find the next territory to count out and sing about, only don't be lonely, because we're all walking on the same storied earth.

With Frances Mayes, there is inspiration to be instrumental to the good of one's community in words and deeds, the idea of expanding ever-outward in a positive ripple effect through expressed viewpoints. We learn of what the author does to weather the gales, be it writing, cooking, reading, thinking of ways to reach out to others, or the "occasional howling at the moon."

Frances Mayes is the author of a number of best-selling works including *Under the Tuscan Sun* adapted into the 2003 film, *Bella Tuscany*, *Under Magnolia*, *A Year in the World*, and *Every Day in Tuscany*. Further titles include odes to the Italian lifestyle with essays and photographs, a cookbook, a travel journal, and an acclaimed novel that reflects her roots in the South. She was a professor of creative writing at San Francisco State University, where she directed The Poetry Center and chaired the Department of Creative Writing.

In these surreal times, what helps? Run for school board or town council, get active in your realm. Give money but not just money. Call 'em on lies and tinpot dictator actions—social media is powerful. Write op-ed pieces for your local paper. Encourage your clubs, church toward social action. Call those politicians enough so that you memorize the phone numbers. Tutor. Remember education is most important. Lack of critical thinking got us where we are. All that helps. But we are in rough times. What helps me: writing my books, cooking great dinners with friends, resisting the venting and name calling that I would like to do, reading poetry, thinking of random acts of kindness, and occasional howling at the moon.

With Thomas C. Foster, we re-evaluate how we view our own role in the evolving story of a nation, take on the challenge of diving into different perspectives, allow creativity to reframe what we're internalizing, and unplug from what's going on just long enough to happen upon that "one true thing." In its being found, "the world opens up."

Thomas C. Foster, PhD is the author of over seven titles, including NYT best-seller, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* and his latest, *Reading the Silver Screen*. He is a leading scholar of twentieth-century English, Irish, and American literature; modernism and postmodernism; literary analysis for general readers; and critical theory. Foster taught as a member of the University of Michigan-Flint faculty for over twenty-five years, retiring with the designation of professor emeritus of English.

How to Write America

We have come through—and continue to inhabit—a fractious time. I have lived through only one other moment in which the national mood could be described as outrage on all sides, and that moment required a war in a distant land and a struggle for long-denied rights by an entire segment of our population. That mood was unhealthy then, and of course it is no more salutary now. It would seem impossible that three hundred million or so of us could be seething resentment at one another all the time, but in recent months the rhetoric on all sides would appear to support that case.

I have written elsewhere that the Great American Novel is a legend we try to believe in, akin to Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster, a grainy photograph on bad stock in poor lighting. Not finding this impossible being, we seek it everywhere, hoping each new book will be The One. Perhaps instead we might understand it as a process, something to which every writer, whether native born, immigrant, or transient observer, contributes some small portion. Even when, as now, we may feel that America is writing us and not the other way around.

Part of the current difficulty is, perhaps, a lack of agency. Beyond that, we have succumbed on all sides to that all-too-human tendency to reduce our "opponents" to caricatures: all 2016 Republican voters are X, all Democrat voters Y. This failure to see individuals and instead force all pegs into one shape of hole leads us to apply to the "other side" epithets and adjectives that we would in no circumstance permit our children to use. If all of this is

so, one way to reclaim some element of agency is to write our way through it. Here, then, are a few exercises to undertake as a way forward in understanding this moment and our place in it.

If ever a series of events and a motley cast of *dramatis personae* seemed custom-designed for the novelistic (or maybe dramatic) hand the current model is it. But is it tragedy or farce? Epic or satire? One thing it probably can't be is high realism: who would believe it? But let's not write an entire novel; let's limit ourselves to a manageable portion. No grading here, of course, so do as many or as few as you like—or make up more suitable ones for yourself. Here are your prompts:

A) **No Exit.** Two politicians, one an ultra-conservative male and the other an ultra-liberal female, are trapped in an elevator.

Just for fun, switch the genders. They have just learned that they will be stuck for hours and so settle into a discussion to pass the time. Although they begin by studiously avoiding politics, eventually their underlying views rise to the surface. Can they find commonalities among the differences? What lessons can they learn from one another? Your challenge is to make the one with whom you disagree as fully human as the one with whom you sympathize.

B) **A Martian Sends a Political Postcard Home.** Describe the current political landscape (or the one during the primaries or general election season) from the point of view of that ultimate outsider, a bemused space-being. Your challenge: this being has no knowledge of our political map, our cherished truths (right or left), or our standards of behavior. What would such a creature learn from us? How might it critique our choices? Would we care to read that postcard?

C) **Stairway to Haiku.** Take seven seminal moments from the last year. They can be political or not. Render them in haiku form, three lines, five-seven-five syllables. Your challenge: what, a haiku isn't enough? Why seven? Why not?

D) **Lights! Camera! Agon!** Look, we can't survive this without blowing off some steam, so here's your chance. Cast a movie you know well using central figures from current political events as your actors. My own imagination runs toward noir films, so I personally favor something like *Body Heat* or *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and there are more than

enough candidates, if you'll pardon the expression, to fill the cast. If your tastes incline toward comedy, then maybe you'd like to see a well-known Republican paired with a well-known Democrat in *The Odd Couple* (you know that would work) or the 2016 candidates in a Tracy-Hepburn battle-of-the-sexes film. Perhaps your tastes run more to contrasting roles in *Return of the Jedi* or members of the same party in a Gene Wilder-Richard Pryor comedy. The possibilities are endless and occasionally horrifying. But sometimes hilarious.

E) One True Thing. Finally, get out. Out of the house, out of your head, out of the social media (and traditional media) space. Find one thing you can see clearly. Write about that as faithfully as you can. Shut out the noise of the world as you do this. Do not allow the President, the Supreme Court, the Super Bowl, or the outside world to enter into your description. What that thing is matters not. Frost got poems out of snowy woodlots, abandoned woodpiles, and forking paths. None of those is especially elevated or poetically privileged. Your thing can be a blue jay or a pile of rocks or a city park before or after people inhabit it or your dog cavorting in a field. It can be a traffic jam you're stuck in or the people riding in your subway car. The point is to find the truth of that situation, to find your truth. Once you can manage one true thing, the world opens up.

With Alice Hoffman, we discuss caring for one another and how kindness and honesty are keys to addressing not only what's going on in the world around us, but within ourselves as we heal and express. On keeping a journal, she remarks that it "is the one place where you can write your fears and hopes without any judgment." The parameters of the page outline a sacred, safe space and catharsis is achieved by the ageless art of writing by hand.

Alice Hoffman is the *NYT* best-selling author of twenty-six novels, eight titles for younger audiences, and the 2013 non-fiction release, *Survival Lessons. Here on Earth* was an Oprah's Book Club selection and *Practical Magic* was made into the 1998 film. *The Dovekeepers* was adapted into a CBS mini-series. Hoffman attended Adelphi University and received an Edith Mirrielees Fellowship to the Stanford University Creative Writing Center, receiving an MA in creative writing.

1) On survival and choice: The central characters in your novels are survivors; survivors of the wild, survivors of loss, prejudice, isolation, and

repressive expectation. Your non-fiction book, *Survival Lessons*, conveys the learnings of surviving not only illness, but the aspects of life we cannot control—it does this through the power of choice in chapters that cover what we can control to shape our lives into what we need them to be. In our 2013 interview, you'd commented, "I wrote it as if I was writing to a friend, in the most personal and intimate way. And I wrote it as if writing to myself as well—these are lessons I need to learn each and every day."

With far-reaching division, fear, and unrest, for us to heal, for us to emerge together as survivors, we each need to look at what's going on at a personal level. We need to make choices about what's in our control, namely ourselves—our words, thoughts, deeds. You include a quote from Elie Wiesel in *Survival Lessons* that states: "There's a long road . . . ahead of you. But don't lose courage . . . Help one another. It is the only way to survive." You remarked in the book that when you "help others, your own troubles aren't as heavy. In fact, you can fold them like a handkerchief and place them in your pocket. They're still there, but they're not the only thing you carry."

What would you say is the most important choice we can make to take better care of one another?

A: The most important choice we can make is to care for each other with kindness, but also with honesty. We have to address both the world around us and our own inner world. At this time, more than ever, it's especially important to take action to help your community in any way you can.

2) As you wrote about addressing the lessons of the book (*Survival Lessons*) to yourself as well to relearn them each day, what would your advice be on beginning a cathartic journal where a person can write to themselves the very resources they'll need to endure in this period?

A: Writing is a healing act, and those who write often find comfort in difficult times. Writing is a way of understanding the deepest parts of yourself. My advice is to write every day, at the same time if possible—usually in the morning before your inner critic is awake—and to let your thoughts flow as freely as possible. The closer to dreamtime will bring you closer to the essential you. This is the one place where you can write your fears and hopes without any judgment. My advice, give yourself this gift.

With Don Wallace, we view life as a canvas and "dare to think and to live aslant," pursuing meaning through our passions and the helping of others, "lightly connecting as we go." When "standing in the middle of an island with no signs," we realize that "art is a compass" and can be a true way of living.

Don Wallace is the author of *The French House*, *Hot Water*, *A Tide in Time* and *One Great Game*. Don has written for *The New York Times*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Fast Company*, *Kirkus Reviews* and many other publications. He has won awards such as the James Michener Copernicus Prize for a novel; the Pluma de Plata Mexicana for reporting about Mexico; and the *New York Times*' Eagle Award. Don has worked as Executive editor at Time Inc. and at New York Times Magazine Group; as senior editor at Conde Nast and Hearst.

Having had the good/bad fortune of living through our country's interesting times, starting with the Cuban Missile Crisis and lurching ever since through life, I've been torn between the necessary political and civic engagement required of a member of society who honors "the decent respect to the opinions of mankind" and the practicing artist's hermitic, anarchic and ultimately selfish removal from society and its ruling consensuses. Yet I've been seeing a reflection of a need to look at this thing in the mirror of the past. Not to look away. Not to shrug, or merely substitute a discretionary act of good. But, in a way, to witness—both as writer and as an individual who claims a conscience and a soul.

At times I have lived solely (or as nearly as possible) in a political moment. Inside the "movement"—be it civil rights or opposition to the war de jour (first Vietnam and then El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, and then...)—I've had moments of what felt like earned righteousness, have seen what change looks like on the ground. Mostly, I've known frustration and weariness. But that isn't what affected the decision to periodically withdraw into the realm of art, in my case, writing.

No, it was the effort and rigor required to self-police one's evolving political consciousness, a reactive process that increasingly came into conflict with the imperatives of creation. While living through periods of mandatory public self-criticism (what the Red Guards called "eating bitter earth") and internecine warfare that destroyed that once-monolithic "movement," it became obvious that art was more than a cop-out, more than a refuge, more

than “a withdrawal to our villas in the hills,” as Lewis Lapham, then editor of *Harper’s*, once remarked as we stood in the rain shortly after the contested election of 2001.

Art is sanity, especially in insane times. Especially when you feel like you're standing in the middle of an island with no signs, as I literally have, art is a compass.

And yet there are no guarantees that the art you attempt in times like these will come to anything. With writing, all bets are off. You just do what you must, or what you think you must, devil take the hindmost. Meanwhile, the world and its fates may unspool with or without your witnessing, or even participating. That’s art, too. Do the dishes? Go to that baby shower? Meet those out-of-towners? Sweep the garage? Sure, as long as it’s understood that it all depends, as William Carlos Williams wrote, on the “red wheel / barrow.” That’s the nature of the practicing artist’s being. It’s why our mothers despair of us.

And yet they shouldn’t. In my 2015 interview here at *The Write Place*, I'd said that it's not hard to live parts of your life in an artistic way; that finding intensity, finding a profession that challenges you, finding meaning in helping others build something and hold a community together, that's the larger canvas. That's why, when we crawl away, we don't go far. Because we dare to think and to live aslant, we are like spiders spinning webs inside and around our communities, finding the psychic nodes, lightly connecting as we go. Others may not see us, or know what we do. But then one morning comes. Those who are walking in the valley stop, wondering who these yellow orb spiders are whose webs catch glints of sunlight in the morning, making diamonds out of dew.

If we create, if we honor art as a mode of living, we are blessed—twice blessed. First, we have a functioning operating system that we’ve evolved that apprehends reality in its many contradictory aspects; second, we have a way of converting our perceptions into a counter-force, a personal resistance, a cri-de-coeur. Whether we work the magic of being political and artistic is our challenge. That’s our third blessing. By having our work cut out for us, we have no excuse for wringing our hands.

Poetry quote: Williams, William Carlos, “XXII”, *Spring and All* (New York: Contact Editions / Dijon: Maurice Darantière, 1923).

With Renee Ashley, we sort through our tangled thoughts and feelings, our "unarticulated, emotional cargo" and focus closely, only on that which resonates. We learn to work with our fear, understanding that it "is an emotion. Emotion is a fire. And fire casts light. That light allows articulation and recognition." For those who write, for those who've never written but wish to, it is an open invitation to make room for the light, to uncover the "write" fit that gives you comfort.

Renée Ashley is the award-winning author of six volumes of poetry, including her latest, *The View from the Body*. She is as an instructor in Fairleigh Dickinson University's low-residency graduate programs, and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, as well as a Pushcart Prize.

You know that great feeling you get after you've cleaned out a drawer, or a closet or cabinet, or maybe, even, an entire room? And suddenly (after struggle and frustration and the dusty work of pushing through to the end) you can *see* what exactly it is you own? Don't you feel lighter? Cleaner? Less boggled? I always feel as though I'm seeing more clearly, as though my vision, itself, has cleared up. And that's what I'm talking about. You don't need to be an efficiency expert; you don't need to be a professional organizer. It's your stuff. You own it—whether you've forgotten about it or just haven't seen it for a while, that tidying up is clarifying.

My thoughts and feelings are a lot like my closet. The inside of my head is a rat's nest, a teenager's bedroom, a landfill. Things are tangled, some get buried, some forgotten or just overlooked. I'd be willing to bet that, to one degree or another, your head is some version of mine—less slapdash, perhaps, but stuffed with known and unknown bits, gold and detritus, probably, but crammed full of a lot of undifferentiated stuff.

I've said, many times in the past, that I write to find out what I think, that I surprise myself in writing more frequently than not when I'm attentive enough to push through to what I hadn't known before. It's still true.

It might be because I tend to address what I am not already certain of, mere shadows of what I have not yet named or described beyond vagaries like *uneasiness*, *tension*, *knottiness*, or *pain* or *regret*. Sometimes I can pinpoint the larger arena of my concern (work, love, loss, etc.); sometimes I cannot. Sometimes I'm just plain anxious. But whatever it is that's bothering me—minutiae, overgeneralizations or oversimplifications, or just

plain lurking wrongheadedness—it's eating at me and it's emotional. I find, too, that most of my amorphous feelings are one form or another of *fear*.

Maybe you wouldn't call yours that. Maybe you'd call yours *anger* or *trepidation* or *ego* or *dread* or *shame* or *remorse*. Maybe you wouldn't call them anything at all, but there's something there—that same thing I call *fear*—nudging you towards some irritation, acknowledgment, action, or resolve.

We ground so much on unarticulated, emotional cargo! There's important-to-us stuff that's still preverbal and/or already lost in the midden inside us! Like memory itself: retrieval becomes the issue. And articulation, by hard work or sheer good luck, is what allows us to differentiate it and give that nebulous nudging more concrete, harder edges. It lets us see it in a form outside of ourselves, lifted from the tangle and held up to the light. It actually feels like a kind of magic when something you didn't know you felt (good or bad) materializes in front of you like something from a *Harry Potter* movie.

That mental morass, I've been speaking of, is most often the place I write poems from. But here's the wonderful/awful thing: Fear is an emotion. Emotion is a fire. *And fire casts light*. That light allows articulation and recognition. That's the payoff for the effort of going deeper. And in order to do it, you need to relax and open yourself. Breathe, don't tense up. You need not to care, *for the time being*, what others might think or, even, what you, yourself, might think. You need to drop your public self, access the self you keep in the dark of yourself, and bring it out into that light. And then acknowledge it.

So, I invite you to write what you cannot yet say. No writing prompt is foolproof, of course, and nothing works for everyone. But what doesn't work for you one day, may produce startling insights on another. Be patient. Lean back. Let your mind *play*. A prompt is neither a test nor a contest. It's a solitary exploration that may take you somewhere you might not otherwise have ever seen. Here's one way to begin:

1. Choose an object that is somehow, directly or peripherally, but deeply, implicated in the image of how you see yourself or how you see your life. The object can be literal or figurative. For example, if you're a writer—or if you *want* to write—choose perhaps, a pen or some other writing implement. Or, you might choose something like a great-aunt's golden silk

kimono (stuffed in a closet) or a Scotch bottle (empty or full) or nail clippings (yours on your own bathroom floor or someone else's in the waste basket of your hotel room) or a piece of petrified wood (you were given or found and thought was just a rock) or even a hole in a wall (that you or someone else, known or unknown, made). Or it might be a tightrope or a sinkhole. Something that sets your bells ringing or that quivers inside you.

If the sensation/image has stuck with you over time, it's worth investigating. Do you see what I'm getting at? Choose something meaningful to *you*—not to the world at large—something that resonates inside you, even if, right now, you're not certain what that resonance means.

2. Then describe the object you've chosen in as much detail as you can.

3. Then begin listing all the ways that object (this pen of yours, say) might get you *into* some difficulty. And list all the ways it might get you *out* of some difficulty. Or list, point-by-point, your history with it or what that history might have been.

4. See where this writing takes you. Go deep, go further than you'd like; make more associations, more implications. Give it time. Add something animate. Get crazy if you need to. You'll feel it when some deeper possibility is quickened, a small fire lighted—and then off you go. Leave any or all external instructions behind and work even more closely with the material in the way it seems to demand.

(Note: This is not meant to be a freewriting-keep-your-pen-moving model. It might be considered more of an imaginative-listing-sourced-from-an-emotionally-loaded-focus model.)

Writing *from* an object that is deeply associated with you is the key. *From* what you can identify *to* that which you did not know or understand when you began. Articulation gives thoughts boundaries, gives them clearer, if not clear, edges to grasp and hold onto, to clarify what, before, was nebulous and difficult to grasp. If you're a *Harry Potter* fan, you might consider your original object a *portkey*, the thing that will take you quickly from one place to another, though you may not know where you'll end up. And when, somewhere down the line, your associations and articulations become a paragraph or a poem, a diary entry or a letter to a friend, that writing will contain a deep part of you—a *horcrux*, if you will.

You may want to share that newly articulated part of yourself with others or you may not. It's up to you. Trust yourself. Just write, focusing on the object you've chosen. You never have to show it to a soul if you choose not to.

If you try this, I hope something wonderfully clarifying rises to consciousness and then manifests on your paper—like a fabulous shirt you've forgotten you own, but find at the bottom of your closet, and take up from the floor and put it on your back. With this writing-sort-of-shirt, you can be certain it's still going to fit.

*Here we would like to thank featured past and present subjects for permitting us to interview them. It was an honor to be able to discuss life, literature and art with them.

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