

MADE YOU LOOK

WHEN I WAS A KID, I loved big-city construction sites. I would stare down through cutouts in the sidewalk barricades at other worlds of mud, pipes, and brown ponds. These places beneath a downtown's concrete crust seemed like giant sandboxes to me, with Lilliputians in hard hats and raincoats, dozing around in their yellow Tonkas. These were dirty secret gardens, underlying the clean familiarity of street level. Everyday life with its zooming cars, its fur coats and fashions, its all-important signs. It made me begin to wonder how many microcosms inhabit our own. Thousands, infinite numbers, hidden from the public eye.

I have an idea about writers. We're all just peeping toms. Our other-worlds exist on the undersides of blank pages. The keyhole is a mind's eye.

What I wish for at the best of times is to peer in and describe. Hopefully my story will be as vivid and as three-dimensional as it is in my mind. More than that. I want my reader to climb in with the flashlight I have left for her at the door. I wish her to enter the way away-teams in Star Trek beam down to newfound planets, with curiosity, trepidation and hope. I'm Scotty in the control room, necessarily left

behind.

I might dream up a scene on a tropical beach where a couple are having a fight. The details of the quarrel don't matter so much as the fighting style. They argue in the laziest way possible, without looking at one another, lying on their backs, basking the fronts of their bodies. There is the somewhat obscene smell of hot suntan oil and sweat in the breeze. The incessant tinkling of bamboo chimes. The wife sits up in her bikini. The wind here is different from anywhere else, she thinks. It's so humid it's liquid, refusing to shush past the ears. The sand is very fine, without any pebbles or even shells, like blonde sugar. Beautiful people stroll and sunbathe. They are always doing this, she and her husband, denting perfection with their petty clashes. Here there is no surf, only insipid, lapping waves. The lip of the ocean has slid out sneakily, leaving naked, sandy flats. It gives her an uneasy feeling. Without water the air feels just that little bit hotter. She feels like her mind is roasting. A thought occurs to her like the white fire of the sun, sparkling relentlessly on the water: *my god, I have got to get out of here . . .*

I have travelled somehow from the landscape into the mind of another human being. Hopefully you have travelled there, too. This is why I love reading. Words transport thought. They parcel and deliver imagination. When I read I can be anyone else. I get to wear their glass slippers and try on their flak jackets. For a time I can be a pro basketball player or the child of a Calcutta prostitute. I can't help thinking it's a kind of literary peacemaking, this temporary merging of beings.

There's magic in writing as sure as there's magic in reading. Every day when

we sit down at the desk we tunnel down rabbit holes, gain passage to wonderlands at the back of the wardrobe. But just outside our door there's a bustling household, a world of mundane detail that's oblivious to our adventures. Car breakdowns, rent cheques, blocked drains, forgotten bill payments, calls from friends in need, unexpected house guests, sinks full of dirty dishes. The bureaucracies of life, expected and unexpected, neither comic nor tragic. We call them interruptions. Yet we need them as ballast to float us back down to earth.

Writing and everyday life are for me in some ways immiscible, oil floating on water. I can't write and do anything else. I can't spend the day sending faxes and making photocopies, and then come home to write. I've been drained of something essential. One phone call from the bank while I'm deep in a story and my mind goes irreparably blank. With reading it's the same. I can fold laundry while watching TV. I can walk and chew gum, but I still can't read and drive. Reading is for the solitary, the unoccupied, for waiting rooms and passenger seats. Reading, like writing, is an excellent waste of time.

§ § §

I DON'T HAVE KIDS, but I've watched them in action. It seems they know a thing or two about procuring parental attention, even before they learn to how talk. A friend on the phone senses when I'm distracted. Even my dog knows, if I'm petting his head, when I'm focused on something else. A divided presence won't do. It simply isn't

good enough.

Attention is the glue of communication. Without it we're a bunch of mad people yammering senselessly to ourselves. To be looked at and listened to feels like the warm light of compassion, a version of unconditional love. It must be worth more than we think—our collective undivided attention—very valuable indeed.

Everywhere we look, there are splashy, glittery things. Sometimes I walk by billboards so bright I can almost see them through my eyelids. Photos so subtly and subliminally compelling I can't help but turn my head. *Made you look*, they say, striking my eye, and sometimes even my heart. They want me like a poor girl wants sugar daddy, with sweet nothings so sweet they're *almost* true.

A book wants me, too, but in a different way. A book is a shy presumer of the gift that a reader gives back to it. Of time spent, a slice of a life, for which there is no money-back guarantee. The jacket may wink from the bookseller's shelf, but underneath the gloss there are only words on a page. And if they fail to engage, the dance is over and the book is left all by itself on the floor.

Attention. So coveted, and yet look how fleeting, how promiscuous. There are a million directions in which it can go. And it does. It wanders. Its nose leads it off into deep woods. I wake up from my daydreams a blissful amnesiac, unable to remember exactly where I've been.

Corralling the mind is like taming a wild horse. That's why writing is so difficult, why it can't be a selfish activity. When we sit down to write we've got to shut out the world. And shut out our own thoughts as well. We're pets shooed from

the house when the guests come for dinner. Naturally we don't like to be left out of the action. That's why we don't write, why we drag ourselves to the keyboard some days when the words are slow to come. I myself am a superprocrastinator. I have brushed and flossed. I've checked chores off a list. I've cleaned out the junk drawer, picked pills from my sweaters. I've talked long-distance. I've packed and moved house. I've run for the border. Anything, anywhere, but write.

Whenever I feel uninspired, like I've got nothing to say, I go to the bookshelf and take down my favorite books. I pick up a short story about two young friends, one healthy, one dying of AIDS. The story is heartbreaking. The writing itself, so unflinching, so compassionate, so true. The best prose describes the world in this way—just as it is, hold the rainbow sprinkles. It takes tremendous energy to pull this off. To transform the messy, chaotic exuberance of life, to make it lie down obediently on the page. A dirty job, these stories remind me, but someone's got to do it.

For the vast majority of writers, time is worth nothing. We'd have more luck selling handbags from the trunks of our cars. But what about all this effort, these feats of patience and will? Where does the energy go? I look down at my own pages and surely the work exceeds the product. If we wired up our brainwaves could we power Las Vegas? A single house, a single bulb?

I have a sentimental and entirely unscientific theory. While we're writing we're not designing rocket launchers. We're not driving around in monster SUVs. We're not burning plastic or abusing our bus drivers. We're not selling crack or

cutting down trees. We're buying nothing and no one is buying us. I tell myself, maybe foolishly, that we're adding to something big, organic and quietly growing. We're leaves on a forest floor. We're giving some words our full attention. A microscopic gesture in the grand scheme of the universe. Worthless in some ways, and therefore (I'm hoping) priceless.

© 2006 by Charlotte Gill. This essay originally appeared in *Event* (35:1). Visit *Event* online at <http://event.douglas.bc.ca>.