**What are you an expert on?**

What is writing and why do we do it? What exists between the lines?

I study creative writing, and when we were sitting in the first class, our teacher, Benjamin Markovitz, asked us, one by one, to say out loud what are you an expert on? I think I answered something along the lines of “I’m an expert on old Finnish lighthouses and their operation” which wasn’t really what he was going for.

Thinking more about it, I realized that something that I am, somewhat of an unwilling expert on, is existing in a space between identities. Not to get into what that exactly means for me, it is sufficient to say that in many of the fields in which one can be conventionally a semi-outsider to the regular social structuring, I have at least some experience in. For example, I am an international guest here, though I have lived in this country. Wherever I go, I will always be somewhat of an international guest. That is one fragment: I am someone who has grown up, not rootless, but with several roots, thin like strings, or mycelium, stretching through several oceans, some stronger than others, but without a neat container to place them in. The answer to the question, where are you from, is “that’s a long story.”.

All of our identities are conjunctions, intersections in a wide network of roads that were trying to navigate, but the person reading the map on the passenger side has fallen asleep and were wondering whether we missed the next left. Point is, all of our identities are comprised of fragments. We are several things at once, aware of them or not, and several things depending on the contexts. But one thing must be made clear; we are experts in our experience – we are experts in our existences.

I would like to invite you all to think what you are an expert on. This is what is necessary for you to write, and when I say write, I mean it in the broadest possible sense of the word: I like to consider writing as a behavior innate to humans, much like dancing. I am not necessarily talking about the physical act of putting pen to paper, but rather the act of recording, perceiving; Poetry is every kind gesture, every story told by a mother to a child falling asleep, every proclamation of love, of community, every angry word, every grievance every admittance of shame or dream of happiness that is spoken, written, unspoken or unwritten somewhere. Like Auden wrote, in his elegy for Yeats, “For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives, a way of happening, a mouth”

You don’t have to be a writer for this to apply to you, but we are in a conference for writers, so I hope you will excuse the narrowing of the subject. Writing, the act, then, is behavior yes, but it is also a decision.

I asked you to think what you are an expert on. Whatever that is, it relates to other people.

Only through the desire knowing others, can a writer make themselves, like T.S. Eliot said, most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.” This desire is also what makes the writer able to write as a member of any group – only through laboring to understand a group can a writer incur a desire, the ability and the reason (and reasoning) to write, be that group whatever it may, a nationality, a creed, a group of artists, rangers, woodworkers, plumbers, even just a group of neighbors, the desire that starts from the self, from the ego, extends to others, to community. We learn to, and we write to be seen as a part of something, or to show, from the inside how something is, as an individual that has an identity as part of a bigger whole. Any kind of deep knowledge, deep belonging (even when the experience itself is one of not belonging), will do. And the most meaningful things are done with this deep knowledge.

The facets of the self, the parts of our identity that we claim ownership to (for identity and ownership are strongly related) are necessary for the individual to decide to write. We desire to share that which we have seen specifically, either in the imagination or in the world, generally both, for the imagination is born of the world and the world of our experiences of it. This notion, and choice of subject that is fueled by the individual identity, this special way of seeing, is explained wonderfully (and much better than I can) by Henry James in his preface for The Portrait of a Lady; "The house of ﬁction has in short not one window, but a million––a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will.” (p. 7) James’ articulates in a wonderful way what I’m trying to say here, that the individual writer decides on a subject that must come from their “self”, their identity, and here the identity has to be extended also to areas of interest, so to be considered in a broad sense, (as in “I am woman”, “I am bisexual” and “I am interested in the mating rituals of frogs” must all be considered as part of identity), and this requires for the writer to desire to look deep into themselves for something, and they need to want to write, to want to be a part of a group or witness to an event and to decide that they are specifically the set of eyes that can see this that should be read by others. In a way, the reason to write, is the decision that one’s point of view is enough to warrant sharing – in short, to have something to say. Even if that something is nothing, we still need to believe that nothing to be enough.

This window, this thing that we are looking at, exists inside of you, it exists between the lines, it exists in the spaces which are unsaid, in the meeting points of these fragments that float around like surfaces. The lines are an imperfect medium for a perfect thing. In this way, something like translating, becomes an incredibly delicate act – a translator must be able to look beyond the words, behind them, in between them, in the spaces of a breath, to try to see, not the window, for that may be impossible, but perhaps its outlines, perhaps to open one just next to it, so close you can see almost the same view. In reality, this process is not at all dissimilar to the process of writing itself, though the group and point of view, then becomes enveloped by the work in question – a compounding of a mouth.

Colum McCann said it well: “The job of 'fiction' … is to imaginatively probe the small, anonymous corners of the human experience, where the untold has been relegated to darkness.” And to do that, we need to find that darkness, make it our own, make it what makes us tick, and then tick so loud others can hear.

I would like to invite you all to consider what is this untold space, this darkness between the lines for you. I would like to invite you all to be brave – brave in small ways, brave in large ways, because even when you think no one is looking, you may still speak, and when you speak, you may be heard – and every time someone is heard, the world becomes a more beautiful, more full place – what are you an expert on? Look at who you are, between the lines, look even when its scary.