

THE TALENT OF THE ROOM

by Michael Ventura

Letters at 3AM – 1993

People who are young at writing – and this does not necessarily mean they're young in years – ask me, now and again, if I can tell them something useful about the task. *Task* is my word, not theirs, and it may seem a harsh and formal word, but before writing is anything else it's a task. Only gradually do you learn enough for it to become a craft. (As for whether it becomes your art – that isn't really up to you. The art can be there in the beginning, before you know a thing, or it may never be there no matter what you learn.)

"The only thing you really need," I tell these people, "is the talent of the room. Unless you have that, your other talents are worthless."

Writing is something you do alone in a room. Copy that sentence and put it on your wall because there's no way to exaggerate or overemphasize this fact. It's the most important thing to remember if you want to be a writer. Writing is something you do alone in a room.

Before any issues of style, content, or form can be addressed, the fundamental questions are: How long can you stay in that room? How many hours a day? How do you behave in that room? How often can you go back to it? How much fear (and, for that matter, how much elation) can you endure by yourself? How many years – how many *years* – can you remain alone in a room?

I know people who, when young, had wonderful talents: prose of grace and resonance that came without effort, sentences that moved intelligently with that crucial element of surprise, never concluding quite where one expected, so that you were always eager to read the next and the next. Promising work, as they say. But to write anything that would keep the promise, to be beyond the letters, verse, and stories of their youth, written with such enthusiasm, friends and teachers praising them, little magazines publishing them – to take the next step meant that they would have to sit alone in a room for years.

Some sat just for weeks. Some lasted months. Some kept saying that next summer, or next winter, or after they graduated, or when they moved to Europe (which they never did), or when they got a grant, or when they weren't so busy, or when they could afford a place that gave them the *space* (because they needed an actual *room*; it couldn't be just the bedroom or the kitchen)... *sometime* in the foreseeable but not the immediate future, then they'd write that novel or complete that sequence of poems.

A few of these talented people would even arrange the room. A good desk, a clean, well-oiled typewriter (a computer now), the paper, the pencils, the stereo, maybe a hot plate. But after the room is ready you have to sit in it. For a very long time. (Sometimes it takes weeks or months even to begin writing.) And that's the talent they didn't have.

There's no harm or blame in not having a talent. But it is very painful to have some of the talents, almost all of the talents, except the one you really need.

The teachers who fawn on your early work (if you were lucky or unlucky enough, as the case may be, to have such teachers) don't usually tell you about this because

they're not writers, they're teachers. They may do some writing on the side, but few have staked their lives on writing. Their wages, their prestige, their social life, their surroundings, the rhythms of their days and of their years, are rooted in the profession of teaching, which is an activity done in a room with other people, surrounded by rooms filled with people, upstairs and downstairs and down the hall. You cannot teach the demands of solitude in such places. Even if you talk about it, you're not teaching it – the surroundings contradict the lesson.

The surroundings are *always* the lesson. That's the trouble with college. What it teaches, more than anything else, is how to go to college. Thus most writing courses, by their very nature, ignore the fundamental thing you need to be a writer. That's why, although thousands teach such courses and tens of thousands attend them, precious little work results. You'll notice that the ratio of teaching to work accomplished is much better in med school or in truck driver's school, because those involve skills that can be taught.

Nobody can teach you how you, in particular, are going to behave when you're alone for hours a day over long periods of time trying to deal with unknown quantities: what you have to express, what experience your expression draws on, how that experience relates to the solitude necessary for its expression, the form in which it comes out (which is never quite the form you planned on), how that form changes as it progresses, and, most important, who you are – all these are just a few of the unknown quantities that are locked up with you in your room.

If you're Sharon Doubiago, your room is your van; if you're the young Ernest Hemingway, your room is a café table; if you're Emily Dickinson, your room is your garden; if you're Marcel Proust, your room is your bed; if you're William Faulkner, you compose *As I Lay Dying* in six weeks in a humid shack while you work days in a factory (or was it work nights and write days?). But whoever you are, whatever shape it takes, that room is the center of your life and it's *very* crowded. Everything you are and everything you're not backs you up against the wall and stares at you. You stare back. And eventually you get some writing done.

The thing about the room is this: it's likely you'll have to remain there for years before you even know whether or not you're any good – and it may be years more before anyone else knows. Because you can have the talent of the room and can spend years there but still not be much of a writer. Or twenty years can go by and you *are* good, but you don't get published; or you get published, but nobody notices; or they notice, but they hate it; or you're a lousy writer, but they love it and you get rich. Whatever. The only thing you *know* you'll have twenty years down the line is the experience of the room – how you behaved, what you felt, what you thought, what you dared, what you fled, how you lived life, how life lived you, alone, in that room.

Remember, even if you're financially successful at writing, and even if success comes early, you still have to spend the rest of your life in that room. Money and recognition may make things easier, but they don't change the basic conditions of writing. You may furnish the room better, but you still have to enter it alone and stay there until something happens. And if your livelihood and your family's well-being now depend upon your behavior in that room, then the quality of that behavior becomes crucial in many new ways. Your honesty, your originality, even the accuracy of your memory may very well become financial liabilities.

Most people can blame their sellouts on the institution they work for, or on the way everybody *else* does business, or on the political climate, or whatever. The vast majority of us are simply hired to do a job and then ordered to cut corners, and we feel we have little choice. But nobody orders anybody to become a writer. And nobody becomes a writer without dreams of glory and art. Writers do their selling out consciously, alone in their rooms, where they can't help but know what they're doing, adjusting sentence after sentence to what's saleable, to what the publishers or the editors or the studios want.

It takes a while for those adjustments to become reflexes – a long while of whittling away what's best in yourself. When the process is over you have a face to match it, which is my most screenwriters and freelancers look the way they do.

When it's all over, if you've stuck and had some luck, you have a few things published that you're proud of and a pretty good idea of who you are. Without the first you probably wouldn't have stayed in the room so long, and without the second you'd have gone crazy a long time ago. *Crazy* as a writer would define it: too unbalanced to work. If you can still write, then how crazy can you be?

Plenty crazy, is the answer. The room can become a hole. Your talent of the room, your ability to be there with all your soul, can overwhelm you. Then the rest of life becomes unreal and, worse than unreal, a kind of unlife. So you find yourself writing with a very sophisticated consciousness but living in your relationships with other people far beneath what you write, because it's gotten so you only rally exist in that room and you don't care about outside. And since you write necessarily from memory – for writing in a sense *is* memory, is what you cared about yesterday, or last month, or in your childhood – your lack of feeling for the present may not show up in your work for a while. But when it does, you're through. You may still be published, still be read, but people won't care the way they used to – and they'll know it, and they'll let you know it.

The room, you see, is a dangerous place. Not in itself, but because *you're* dangerous. The psyche is dangerous. Because working with words is not like working with color or sound or stone or movement. Color and sound and stone and movement are all around us, they are natural elements, they've always been I the universe, and those who work with them are servants of these timeless materials. But words are pure creations of the human psyche. Every single word is full of secrets, full of associations. Every word leads to another and another and another, down and down, through passages of dark and light. Every single word leads, in this way, to the same destination: your soul. Which is, in part, the soul of everyone. Every word has the capacity to start that journey. And once you're on it, there is no knowing what will happen.

Locking yourself up with such things, letting them stir, using these pure psychic creations as raw material, and deciding, each time, how much or little you're going to participate in your own act of creation, just what you'll stake, what are the odds, just how far are you going to go – that's called being a writer. And you do it alone in a room.

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