



AN ORIGIN TO DOING

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What are the restrictions that steer, limit, and justify the labor of the imagination? Do we receive the songs of our world with the most topical stratum of our being? Out of some lack of trust, have we made ourselves irrelevant to the world, satellite of the wind, ground, and sky? How many wild convictions, ghosts, songs, and regrets were sent to an asylum because some rancid standard or covetous piece of etiquette felt their windy dictatorship wobble arbitrarily?

What if when we create, out of some chain of allegiance to our origins, the ghosts visit and the expulsion from wind, ground, and sky goes revoked? I think that this is the case, and I'm sure I feel the breath of a phantom on the back of my neck when I need to write. I feel a tug on my chest and a bird flies up to the window. My task is to open the window; it's up to me to look outside and notice, to abandon the coddle of cynicism I've honed the posture for, to forget my face at home so that I can admit my participation in the chorus of the world.

In writing, the stoke that orders my feet to step and my eyes to dilate is acknowledged and, with the crude material of language, gets dressed and described. If my feet and eyes allude to the birds outside the window, it's because I hear them, because I am writing to walk and scribbling to the key of their song.

I want to sharpen my sensitivity. I ask myself: what hibernations and autumnal descents have I neglected to lie down with? How many breezes carrying some scent made for my sinuses and blood have I scoffed away? The rain smells and sounds like a symphony, but I can't pick out a single instrument. Mountains tell the weather what to do, tectonics tell the mountains to stand up, and somewhere at the origin of it all, things that are titanic, violent, and ecstatic are driving the universe. What pulse does the bird grasp that I cannot—or else have lost—because “the bird does not distinguish between her heart and the world's”?¹

If I want the page to reflect the commands of my heart and the sky, I have to relinquish my me, my planner, my role, and my small accomplishments and failures. My own worth must be set in the context of the world; my priorities are considered from the perspective of the moon, and the

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage, 1982), 235.

murmurs of trees and grass approach me without residue. The iron truths that galvanize my body and call me to action glow red. The arbiter of life and death pays attention.

And do you know, do you know that mankind can live without the Englishman, it can live without Germany, it can live only too well without the Russian man, it can live without science, without bread, and it only cannot live without beauty, for then there would be nothing at all to do in the world! The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here! Science itself would not stand for a minute without beauty—are you aware of that, you who are laughing?—it would turn into boorishness, you couldn't invent the nail!²

I am interested in what provoked the efforts of people to begin, what keeps us from buckling under the stone logic of helplessness. I am interested in the pistons of imagination. Behind the nail is the force of the origins, the ventricle of gravity and time, and our bond to the earth. I would like to order away whatever umbrella has covered up the sky, repulsed the dirge of stars, and flattened the choir of birds. I would like to abandon the movement toward boorishness, if that is what we are moving toward. I think some people, out of a terrible forgetfulness, walk around and pray, “Then there would be nothing at all to do in the world!” I write to reckon with the umbrella over the sky and resuscitate the provocation of the nail. Writing begins in communion with beauty, with a firm grip on the chord that stretches from our sternum, up to the star that stuck around even after we shoved an umbrella in its face.

There is nothing necessarily beautiful about flower petals, what may end up on a postcard, or what some barefoot bohemian is blathering about. The last star reveres the vitality of mayhem, and even after, when hyenas cackle at the mess. Beauty: I am talking about the bond that secures us to Earth. All sides of it. After the last “why?”—why you do anything, why you care at all—the only answer defies interrogation. The only answer is because life and the loyalty of death approach, because for some reason, or no reason, our absurd life is beautiful. Why is it beautiful? The umbrella can cite surface characteristics, but these have nothing to do with the vengeance of dreams, or the first deep breath of morning. The umbrella doesn't know why the nail got invented—only how. Writing can open the window so that sidereal reminders come flying into my room. If nothing would “stand for a minute without beauty,” can we also say that everything walks clumsily when it refuses to acknowledge what enables it to stand in the first place?

Writing is a chance for this acknowledgement, to make our steps harmonize with the songs of birds. So, a writing practice that is in cooperation with the instructions of my heart, with beauty, is a reconciliation of trust in the world; what gets written is language's most valiant attempt to bear testimony to the flame of my being.

Beauty is the star outside the umbrella that will never abandon the ground or our feet. It saves you and your parents and the creek of your childhood from becoming graph coordinates or schematics. It doesn't exclude tragedy or the solemnity of a fracture from its majesty. It unfetters the wings in

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1995), 486.

your chest abruptly—a column of birds and wind forthright and swiftly to the lungs from a cloud. Our mouths fumble and name the song inspiration. We nod and agree that this can be its name. Inspiration is the chord that breaches the umbrella and responds to the original and last star. Everything that we do requires that we be inspired to do so first—everything that ever gets done has its vitals in the beautiful.

Writing is a chance to endure the vibrations of this chord. This is what makes writing so ironic: it uses the media of the umbrella, the flesh of language, the infrastructure that set us peripheral to the earth, and attempts to give it an imprint of inspiration, to step to the commands of a primary star. Writing uses the umbrella to indicate outside of it.

When I write, I call upon that star—conscious of it or not. I ask it how to assemble the garbles and tongue smacks of our language into a testimonial to my core. If this goes gracefully enough, I might decide to deem it the product of inspiration. But the potency of our inspiration, of what is written, depends on how clumsily or gracefully we relate to our chord, the sky, and the beautiful.

If I ask my writing to comment on the river, I may appreciate and cite the information the umbrella provides: something about the cultural significance of rivers, the problems and advantages of dams, or how rivers appease an argument about biodiversity. But without beauty, I would never have heard the roar of the river. I couldn't see the shimmer of rocks in its bed. I couldn't care about rivers; I'd lose the inciter for every comment on rivers ever made. I'd forget that rivers couldn't care less about cultural significance, dams, or biodiversity—that's all umbrella drivel, and the river rolls on without blinking. Nothing can be said about rivers prior to their beauty. I'm pretty sure the umbrella thinks it's primary and that it piles a bunch of chores onto rivers. Soon, if it can, it will throw a leash on my moods and the horizon, soon the trees will follow the schedule the umbrella assigns them.

Writing requires that we journey before our first words. It calls on the star and listens for the bird, and then tries to fit these murmurs into the plots of language. In order to symbolically represent what is necessarily prior to any symbol, we find ourselves flirting with the boundaries of culture, knocking up against the ceiling of the umbrella, in a space where the authority of birdsong deposes facts and rules yield to the heart. Out here, songs overflow with meanings that are capable of stretching the limits, abusing language so that it may come close to doing what we want, so that it can allude more honestly to the bedrock of our heart, to an energy prior to any umbrella.

Beauty is the only motivation for the nail and everything that ever got done. It can link what we write to the pulse of our star and our sky. Writing, as the transcription of birds and the vibration of our chord, takes on our fingerprints and is obedient only to our blood. It becomes impervious to the patents of the umbrella because it adheres honestly to the raw media that engage us with the world. Emotions take on a new accuracy, and the material of the constructed world submits to its creator.