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How I Write

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How I Write

Abstract
What I need to write is the voice but I never find an entire voice at once. Because I have to start somewhere, I’ll settle: for a sound, a single sentence, an utterance in the dark, anything that has a little bit of spark or sizzle, that lights me up. This is sentence as light-bringer: there was a blank and now there is a single mote floating in the void, all potential, waiting for the bang.

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What I need to write is the voice but I never find an entire voice at once. Because I have to start somewhere, I'll settle: for a sound, a single sentence, an utterance in the dark, anything that has a little bit of spark or sizzle, that lights me up. This is sentence as light-bringer: there was a blank and now there is a single mote floating in the void, all potential, waiting for the bang.

Huh, I think. What’s next?

Next the voice speaks again. Sometimes it speaks on its own but more often I have to prod it, have to drag from that sentence a next one that somehow continues whatever power the first one contained. I get this part wrong a lot. Maybe most of the time. If I can see how it’s wrong right away then I try again. It’s okay to be wrong a lot of the time while drafting, while I’m still alone in the little room where I do my work. Plus, I can always return and revise and rewrite. I can and I will. This is how we hide our failings.

Now the voice speaks again, speaks directly or at a slant or else it reverses itself completely, and wherever it goes I need to follow its path. Then there are three sentences and then there are four and then five, six, seven, on and on. And from this
process everything else I need appears, not planned but discovered, emergent: character, motivation, conflict, tension, plot, a world.

I believe that it’s possible to do this from one end of a book to the other without break or fail, but that does not mean I believe it will happen for me. I’m afflicted with various kinds of personal weaknesses, lacks, and distractions that probably make this an impossible ideal. But I sometimes get a couple good sentences in a row and if I can’t figure out how to keep going then I start a new thread, build a new fragment, eventually creating a pile of these similar-voiced fragments, scenes and parts of scenes and runs of images or actions. When it feels like I have enough I start arranging the fragments, looking for patterns and possibilities—and then I write into the spaces between, trying to take advantages of juxtapositions, connections, surprises and seeming inevitabilities, places to start from again.

If this works out long enough I might get a story drafted. If it works out for a very long time, then I might be writing a novel. Whatever it turns out to be it’ll be something I never could have planned—discovered one sentence at a time, arranged toward completeness, ready to be revised and rewritten mercilessly—hopefully on its way to at last becoming a manifestation of that possible world I sensed, way back on the first day, when all I had to work with was the microcosm of the whole hidden within the very first words.

Matt Bell’s debut novel In the House upon the Dirt between the Lake and the Woods was published by Soho Press in June 2013. He is also the author of Cataclysm Baby, a novella, and How They Were Found, a collection of fiction. He teaches creative writing at Northern Michigan University.