

A i f r i c C a m p b e l l

Schrijven is een daad van vertrouwen

Writing is an act of confidence



vertaling: René Hooyberghs

Aifric Campbell over haar verblijf in Passa Porta: 'Deze ruimten zijn de grootste geschenken aan schrijvers, het aanbod krijgen van vrijheid en de uitdaging om een vorm te krijgen in een ongevormd idee.'

Aifric on her residency at Passa Porta: 'These spaces are the greatest gift to writers, to be offered the freedom and the challenge to make a shape of the unformed idea.'

I came to Brussels to start my fourth novel. In fact I came to *write* it – to “get black on white”. I am always dishing out Hemingway’s blunt advice to my students because it’s true: without text there is nothing, there is just the idea in your head.

For the past year I’ve been working on three different ideas, filling up little blue moleskins, A4 softbacks in different colours, scraps of papers on my bedside table, notes on my iPhone, my desktop screen has become wall of WORK IN PROGRESS folders. This is a crisis of procrastination, extended by real-life loss and sadness in the last 18 months. Fictional beginnings feel like running along a diving board to take flight, moments full of fear as you sprint for the edge. So when I board the Eurostar for Brussels in London, I’m twitchy with coffee and neck ache and a haunting fear that I might come back with nothing.

I change all habits: update all email accounts to away status, with zero forwarding. Log off everywhere and disable Wi-Fi. The relief is astonishing, the sense of

liberation at being completely out of reach. Just a phone, on silent. I text my son each day.

No TV. No alcohol. No meat. (I don't know why, this just feels right). I eat muesli and yogurt, apples, figs, salad, tomatoes, feta. I sign up to the gym around the corner and I go every day and work hard, plugged into the soundtrack I have assembled for the book. Country music and heartbreak.

It occurs to me I've been spending too long listening to Bach, clinging to structure and certainty.

I set a 24-hour word count— this is new, but I need a quantitative focus. My years working as a banker got me used to measurement by numbers and there's a clean simplicity in a target.

I write scenes out of sequence, without stopping. Without looking back or re reading on my Mac. I walk the streets early in the morning when the shops are being unshuttered, there are coloured whirligigs spinning by the canal, men unloading crates of fruit, tubs of olive, standing smoking, staring. Late at night I see the flicker of TV in an apartment across the way. It is unseasonably warm for September and across the street at Menelas there are diners sitting outside till midnight.

Each night I back up the book remotely to my disk space at the university. It is a clean process that circumvents email.

Sleep is patchy. Uneven. There are blackout curtains in the bedroom and I wake up suddenly each night at 3 or 4am, prowl around the apartment, make notes, look out the window at the shadows on the narrow square below with the fountain. One night I see two drunks trying and failing to climb onto a wooden bench as if they are walking on the moon.

I am groping my way into the book space - it is like stumbling through a portal into the fictional world where I will live until I reach the last word. I recognize this feeling, but it has taken such a long time to arrive. I only know that it is the writing, the black on white, that makes the transition.

I read. George Steiner, Denis Johnson, Guillermo Martinez, Kirsten Hammerechts, Bertrand Russell, TS Eliot, Yeats, Per Petterson, Margaret Atwood. I flick through a French atlas and marvel at how different the familiar world appears in a different language. I try not to think of the others writers who have sat and wavered at this desk. Who might also have wondered about the why and how.

The collision of languages in Brussels is exhilarating, catapults me into the strangeness that I crave, keeps me alert to words, to the strange intricacies of speech, the unexpectedness, keeps me open to the unexpected. When you break all routine, suspend contact, you are left with a version of yourself that is driven only by the book.

I stand still. I stare - at a stuffed fox in a window of lace, a revolving tower of melted chocolate, two puppies on a beggar's lap, a plastic yellow chair, a flurry wave of raised iPhones in Grand Place at dusk.

Artists speak all the time of their need for long uninterrupted spaces. So much is about craft, feeling the weight of a word or a sentence. Writing is an act of confidence – standing on the diving board, your toes gripping the edge, in full and clear

awareness of all that can go wrong in the jump (and it will) but seduced by that thrill, by that risk. You lunge forwards into the dive, slip below the surface and there you find the story that lies beneath.

I'm in the back seat of a Buick, listening to a conversation between two women who have just met. The road is empty, cuts through forest, dark, deep. And I follow it; don't pause to think about all the shortcomings will be revealed in the coming weeks. For the moment I just trust the story unfolding on the screen (DH Lawrence, I don't even *like* reading DH Lawrence.)

I picture my son on the pitch. The moment of calm stillness as he lines up a dead ball. That moment *before* what happens next.

I pack reluctantly. Fold up the sheets of lining paper with storyboards and notes and puzzles. I stroke my Mac. I have shot way past my own target. I place the keys on the table. Then I linger on the threshold, trying to hold off the moment of departure for as long as possible. These spaces are the greatest gift to writers, to be offered the freedom and the challenge to make a shape of the unformed idea. So the book, the text and its beginnings become forever embedded in the place where it took flight, in Brussels, in the apartment on the corner of Antoine Dansaer, at the wooden desk on the 2nd floor.

Aifric Campbell

September 13 2013