



Writer's Block

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LIKE INSOMNIA, OR MEMORY LOSS, or madness, or perhaps more like the mysterious face behind your shoulder in the mirror at midnight, or the black dog racing through the village at night I used to read about as a ten-year-old in a book called *Somerset Folklore*, writer's block is something I prefer to keep in my peripheral vision. If I know too much about it, if I look it in the eye, if I acknowledge it exists and could happen to anyone, I'd be tempting fate.

To keep its possibility at bay, I maintain a strict policy of evasion. I don't even call myself an agnostic. I'd rather not think about whether I believe in it or not. I share a phony, self-deprecating laugh with my id, and persuade myself that I'm *far* too busy to have *that* kind of writer's block. My blocks are all practical, my ego argues. At the beginning of lockdown it was noise and other people. It had to give up the usual sigh of relief when everyone else in the family had departed for school or work leaving just me and the cat and eight or nine hours to write and read. Suddenly, I could never know when a loud conference call or lesson would break through the doors or windows, and I was confined to the small study I share with the boiler, no longer free to roam at will, go to a library or choose to write in bed or in the garden or on a sofa at whim.

I know what I want to write next. I refuse to imagine how it might feel not to have a short queue of possibilities demanding attention. There are delays and circlings and procrastinations, inevitably, along the way. At the moment I'm deep in research and archives, and avoiding embarking



on a new section of my book ‘before I’m ready’. But – terrified always that if I stop completely I may freeze up – I keep on writing this and that and the other, little bits and pieces, for myself and for other people, often small and self-contained, and not always even remotely related to the big project. I’m neither rigorous nor regular about this. It’s more of a chaotic kind of insurance policy, an endless series of amulets. I have plans I don’t stick to, systems that rarely last a week, habits I forget too quickly. I’m not proud of myself. But so far it’s worked.

I spend my life imagining what it must be like to be other people, trying to crawl into the minds and bodies of fictional characters and biographical subjects. But to be a writer with a writer’s block? Superstition triumphs. This I won’t begin to imagine. I will not think too deeply about what true writer’s block might mean.