



The Perfect Place to Write

Marina Benjamin

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT PERFECT, but I'm nostalgic about two specific places where I experienced a kind of creative flourishing at a moment of peak struggle. Ever since, they have become fused in my mind with the act of creating.

One long-ago September, I wrote about the Mormon prophet Joseph Smith and the prophetic imposter Joanna Southcott with the kind of focus I now envy of my former self. I did so while marooned in a tiny cell of a room at Hawthornden Castle, near Edinburgh, a well-known writing retreat supported by the Heinz Foundation. I loved the bareness of my attic room, the way I had to jump up and down in the mornings to face the chill: how my fireplace ate up armfuls of chopped wood each day. The walls were three feet deep and built out of hunks of cold stone, like a primitive fridge. The writers in residence had to obey a rule of silence throughout the working day, so the only time you'd see, or hear, anyone else was if you happened to catch them grabbing their sandwich lunch from the corridor at the same time as you grabbed yours.

Hawthornden fulfilled a particular fantasy of the writer's life as a disciplined regimen, stark and unforgiving. It appealed to me the same way I've always been drawn to the idea of monkish self-sufficiency, the craving of a fruitful solitude. I think of Thomas Merton and his hermit's hut, to which he'd persuaded his abbot to allow him to retreat in order to pursue a life of contemplative seclusion. Set on a small hill, amid woodlands, and about a mile distant from his abbey, Our Lady of



Gesthemani, Merton's hut had a cosy aspect, with its wood-burning stove and a small library. It was a place to think, like Thoreau's tiny pond-side cabin in Concord. Perhaps its modern-day equivalent is the writer's shed — something I currently lack.

My second memorable place could not have been more different. Simple Pleasures was a grungy café in the Richmond district of San Francisco, a Russian and Chinese neighbourhood just north of Golden Gate Park and about thirty minutes walk from the ocean. Simple Pleasures was filthy. Grime was caked into tables, benches and floors; every surface coated in a blackened greasy sheen, and the toilet was unspeakable: with so many holes in the wooden door you could squint out whilst seated and survey the local denizens. Fortunately, it wasn't possible to achieve the same degree of visual perspicuity from the other side.

All the tables at Simple Pleasures were occupied by people on laptops; coders, writers, poets, songsters. Nobody looked as if they had more than two cents to rub together. My writing flew at that café, winged on optimism: it seemed as if everyone there was powered by their dreams. The café also sold mighty fine cream cheese bagels, and after dragging out a coffee for a couple of hours, buying one of these bought me time credits with the owner. And so my days unfurled, page by page, chapter by chapter, bagel by bagel.