



The Writer and Nature

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PERHAPS THE CLOSEST WE COME to a pure, unadulterated experience of the world is through the child's eyes. A time in our lives when the eyes almost always open in wonder.

As Louise Glück writes:

We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

The sense of thrill and awe you feel when you first set foot on fresh snow or sit in a boat about to float is probably the most unmediated transaction with the natural world. It is sensory but also spiritual: a connection with the external world that has not yet been complicated by language and other modes of expression. You just take it all in, in the form of a breath, in the span of a few nervous heartbeats. Something transmits, and we are transformed.

Across history, many writers have found both inspiration and subject material in nature. Where Keats goes into rhapsody over the many forms of beauty in nature, a Fariduddin Attar examines the human ego and the self through the tongues of his allegorical bird assembly. Coleridge's ice still gives me the chills.

My own relationship with nature has been an enduring reminder of tranquillity and composure, of a sudden relaxation of the brow, an easing



of the shoulders... Where I grew up it was often said that to comfort a taxed mind all you need to do is set foot on dewy grass.

The sight of a cluster of pines in a nearby park, therefore, has the power to decontaminate your mind of all the noise in the world. An evening of shaded light, the darkening reflections on the surface of a tree-lined lake, and the sudden explosion of buttercups next to the path you take to school every morning, or the lazy stroll of a pair of birds in the sun — all help you not just to go back in time but also to a place in the mind. This is the place where dreaming and thinking and writing happen.

Something also needs to be said about the direct presence of nature in your writing. What joy it is to sometimes bring to life glimpses of nature as you try to put together an entire world. The unplanned appearance of a rose bush by the threshold of a character's house or the unexpected role of trees in determining the mood, the atmosphere of a story... are all part of the reason why one writes in the first place. There's no better antidote to the stresses of modern life than to sit by a small lake as the evening falls on it.