



The Perfect Place to Write

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WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG I was given a book titled *Peace at Last*.

It chronicles the listless night of an insomniac brown bear. Mr Bear's life is full of tragedy. He's very tired, but he's doomed never to sleep. He's gone to bed all right, hauling himself up (presumably) from an over-late bleary-eyed evening in front of the TV; but he is not going to have a restful time of it. Firstly, while this isn't even nodded to in the story's text, I can see a problem straight away in the first illustration: Mr Bear has no bedroom curtains, and the big nosy moon is spilling light all over the bed of Mr and Mrs Bear. Mr Bear is set up only for failure. And then Mrs Bear starts snoring.

Exasperated, Mr Bear decamps to Baby Bear's room; but Baby Bear is embarked on a nocturnal aeroplane-impersonating noiseathon, so Mr Bear removes to the living room, only to be distressed by the ticking of a clock (an intimation of mortality that distracts us at the best of times). It doesn't end there. Mr Bear's inner calm is variously affronted in the kitchen (a dripping tap), the garden (a hooting owl), and, in the desperate last resort of the car, by the rising sun itself. Dragging his exhausted body back to bed, he finally gets off to sleep, just in time for the alarm clock to go off. That's where the story ends. We are left to imagine Mr Bear's terrible, sleep-deprived day to come, no doubt working in an unfulfilling job at which he does not excel. There is something of Larkin's Mr Bleaney about Mr Bear: a life of limited expectations, dashed hopes.



Sometimes, seeking the perfect place to write, I become Mr Bear. I can't write *here!* The chair's too low. The room's too cold. I haven't got a view. I haven't got the *right* view. That view is so nice it's distracting. I'm hungry. (That complaint at least isn't location-specific.) What am I trying to write anyway? Why am I so tired? What's that *noise*?

If I let myself, I can waste a whole day in search of the perfect place, chasing an ideal desk which does not exist; or which otherwise exists everywhere, but is unreachable: lodged, perhaps, 'in the fork of a pear tree, its four legs in the air', as the table appears to Lily in *To the Lighthouse*.

Yet from Mr Bear's negative example I have learnt, over time, to limit my requirements to the following:

A room with a closeable door. The morning. Or, if it must be night, a room with a well-made pair of curtains, to shut out the busybody moon.