



OUT OF

LINE

**Daring to be an Artist
Outside the Big City**

Tanis MacDonald

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Cover and interior design: Marijke Friesen

Author photograph: John Roscoe

Typeset in Minion

Printed by Ball Media, Brantford, Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Canada.

Wolsak and Wynn Publishers

280 James Street North

Hamilton, ON

Canada L8R 2L3

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

MacDonald, Tanis, 1962–, author

Out of line : daring to be an artist outside the big city / Tanis
MacDonald.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-928088-59-2 (softcover)

I. Title.

PS8575.D6657O98 2018

C814'.54

C2018-900559-9

For my students

Look round, then, and see that none of the uninitiated is listening. The uninitiated are those who believe in nothing but what they can grasp in their hands, and who deny the existence of actions and generation and all that is invisible.

– Plato, *Theaetetus*

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Preface

How do you establish and sustain an artistic practice when the circumstances of your life seem to oppose it? Or, put more plainly, how do you make art when you come from an artless place?

“Artless” is relative, of course: a place where art is not central, let’s say, or a place where art is starved to thinness, or shoved in a corner and told to behave. I thought about this off and on for many years as I wrote poems, then books, then designed and taught courses, then published literary criticism. I thought about it as I moved across Canada several times in pursuit of degrees and jobs and community. As social media ramped up, fostering a hyper-performative and omnipresent pressure to position oneself as a writer, I thought about those of us who live far from big arts communities and still make art, and that led me to think about privilege and obscurity and inclusiveness. Mostly I thought about it here, in a small city surrounded by farmland where factories were shutting down, as I taught creative writing courses to people who were craving a way to think of themselves as artists and writers. I saw hunger and apprehension in their faces: it was very familiar. They looked like I did a few decades ago, and like I sometimes felt now. It was like looking into a mirror. In that same small city, far from both my home

place and the Big City, I remembered reading Mark Zuehlke and Louise Donnelly's short instructive book *Magazine Writing from the Boonies* back in 1997, when I still lived in Toronto, and knew that the years and the miles had remade me into what Zuehlke and Donnelly call a "boonie writer": someone who maintained an artistic practice far from the madding literary crowd.

There can be no question that technology has changed things in the years since that book was published. Email and websites and social media in all its forms have made the "boonies" relative: so far and yet so electronically near. But the day-to-day, feet-on-the-ground artmaking thrives on in-person contact, and as time went by, I had to think seriously about what it is to make yourself (and remake yourself) as a practitioner of art far from a big cultural centre. I could see that my students, in literature courses and in creative writing courses, wanted answers about how they might enter the writing life. My own recalibrated questions about the pleasures and problems of small-place art creation dovetailed with their concerns.

Because the moment the students and I started discussing how to begin, the relative distance between our small place and the Big City ballooned, and the instantaneity of the Internet became largely irrelevant. My students saw right through the veil of accessibility provided by the Internet and got straight to the heart of the matter: how to make art here, with what was before them right now, not in a future that they could not see and a place that they could not (yet) imagine. The ease of blogging and online curation notwithstanding, beginner writers of all ages still crave answers about what it is to have a creative community, and further, a creative practice. These were good things to want to know, and I began to feel my own beginnings as a writer surfacing in my memory as I worked through some answers with my students. How did I figure out that an artistic practice was worth developing and maintaining? Making art of any kind was not an idea that I had picked up from my mostly

lower-middle-class friends in my uncool suburb on the edge of the Prairies where I lived with my Depression-era-raised parents. So who made the pursuit of creating things a possibility for me? The term *artistic practice* can seem pretentious, especially if you have a working-class background like I do. But I mean something doable and even measurable; in the ordinary course of a life, beyond high-flown ideas of awards or public adoration, an artistic practice is what you do to make stuff. Are you a musician? What's the last concert you saw? When did you last play with someone else? What's the last piece you learned? Are you a writer? What are you reading? When did you last write something for yourself? When did you last return to a draft and work to make it better? When was the last time you referred to yourself as a musician or a writer in public? These questions illustrate some of the ways that the work of making something (and admitting to making something) takes repetitive and material practice: time spent when it may appear to others that you are doing nothing useful. If you are from a working-class background or even one generation away from it, you will hear about "usefulness" a lot. An artistic practice, among others things, is rooted in the belief that practice is useful.

The development of an artistic practice is an oddly kept secret, buoyed by a strong cultural belief in instant genius or overnight success. It's no secret, of course, to people in MFA programs or those with strong creative communities, but for many who are beginner artists, this seems as alien and far from them as the moon. For instance, in the imaginations of many people, writers sit in a garret and derive their brilliance from their refusal of the workaday world. They live in big cities without mundane concerns, write furiously in cafés and then spend hours talking to their brilliant friends, arguing passionately into the night. But what if that isn't your life? What if you are trying to write in a lonely environment, trying to create in a small community? Beginner artists can sometimes talk themselves

out of developing an artistic practice because their surroundings don't fit any picture of an artistic life that they've ever seen. But the truth about most writers' lives is much more complicated and much more interesting than starving in a garret or composing in cafés. Writers create art not despite the world's presence, but because they live in the world, and because the world works on them.

Out of Line is about how to begin functioning as an artist if you haven't been raised to think of art as something made by people you know and therefore makable by you. What would it be like to nurture artmaking as an active practice? It is also a book about starting and continuing as a writer outside of a large urban centre. I hope to give you a way to begin at the beginning when your background is artistically inauspicious and you are "out of line" with your family, your class, your background and the Big Events happening elsewhere. This is a book about grounding your creativity and establishing your community; working with, not despite, your uncool background; and about all the barriers, naysayers, reasons to write and *not* to write that you may encounter on the way.

The phrase *out of line* as the title of this book does triple duty as a metaphor: first, to gesture to the quest for artistic practices and community by people who are living "out of line," far from an artistic hot spot. Second, the title alludes to the beginner artist's choice to defy social expectations: to step away from accepted behaviours in our small-place or suburban contexts, and make art despite being told that "you can't," "you shouldn't" and "why would you want to do *that*?" The third meaning for "out of line" is more nefarious, and equally necessary to address: it connotes how mentors with power sometimes depend upon the naïveté of beginners with outsider backgrounds, and use this vulnerability to take advantage of beginner artists. While I chose the title wanting to tap its geographical and social defiance, I would be remiss if I did not discuss this

shadow across our artistic communities in a larger consideration about the importance of a cohort.

This book will address some issues of class, but the best book I know about class is *Where We Stand: Class Matters* by the African-American feminist, cultural critic and social activist bell hooks, and I recommend it to you. In that book, hooks describes the landscape of privilege at the intersections of race, gender and class, and warns that we consider class difference too little, especially in our educational institutions. *Out of Line* is not a book about academic study, but the university classroom will come up occasionally as one kind of training ground for artists and the milieu in which I encounter beginner artists most often. In *Where We Stand*, hooks acknowledges a hard truth about being working class in the academy, what she calls the “price of the ticket.” We are expected to leave the past – that is, our backgrounds – behind. As hooks says: “Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality.” She also notes that given this kind of pressure, many students cannot “bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront.” I have experienced this as a professor and as a student, and one of the reasons I wrote this book was to open up discussion among my students and other beginner artists about what artists’ lives are really like, and to say that an artistic practice and artistic community are practical tools in resisting assimilation, in the university, in publishing, in the world.

The awkwardness of discussing class and the arts community is a serious matter. I asked my friends and colleagues about their early education and beliefs about what art was and who gets to make it, the niches they have found or made for themselves and the communities in which they have participated.

The responses, from these colleagues and others whose words will appear throughout *Out of Line*, suggest that most mid-life artists are very aware of the chances that did not come their way and the ones that did. They remember the people who told them one thing that made a difference or advised them in a way that changed everything. Over and over, I read responses from artists who felt as though an ordinary life just missed them, that it whizzed by as they stepped “out of line” to do something different. Several people wrote that they just squeaked through with their oddness due to someone’s good advice or timely help, very often offered casually but at a crucial moment. Such timely help can take all kinds of forms. This book offers said help in practical chapters, goofy (but true) anecdotes, lyric prose and personal essays: a collage of experiences. Some of these pieces will resemble literary tear sheets, out-of-line asides that don’t summarize as much as blur the boundaries between advice and experience. We are all in this long making game together, and some pieces in *Out of Line* act as beacons from the beyond of my creative practice, or, in the words of Joan Hotchkis, as letters I didn’t send home.

There are a lot of instructional books on writing that you could read, all of them intriguingly packed with exercises and advice on how to get words on a page. I have a whole shelf of these books and often consult them. This will not be one of those books, useful though they are. I am going to trust that you are already getting words on a page, or trying to, and acquainting yourself with practice as both fascination and frustration. Instead of writing instruction, I want to reveal some of the less-discussed fundamentals of an artistic practice that my students always ask about: “How do I find people to talk to about writing?” “How do I keep writing outside of class?” “Can I be a writer if I don’t have that kind of background?” And most practically and poignantly: “How do I do this?”

Let’s find out.

This is for You

This is for you, sitting in the back of your high school class, or maybe in the front, bored and barely passing or passing without trying and wondering why it all seems so formulaic. This is for you in the library, reading anything and everything you can get your hands on not because you are so fascinated, though you might be sometimes, but because you never know what book might give you that sliver of light, the key to getting out of this place, this school, this set of expectations. This is for you who goes to church or temple or gurdwara at your parents' insistence and gets lost for a moment or two in the rhythm of the words or music or prayers or readings, or the harmonies of hymns you haven't believed in for years but still, they sound like leaving, like art that gets made somewhere far away from here. This is for you working that job you wanted, or that job you needed to pay the bills, still thinking about the key to getting out of this place, but you don't want out – you only want more of what you get when you pick up a pen or a paintbrush or a sander, here in this place.

This is for you, your hidden weirdo glory in your rural community, your town without a theatre, your small city with no writers, your family who just wants you to study science and be a

doctor who can move back home and serve the community. And yes, you agree in principle, that would be good, but. For you in the suburbs, so close and yet so far from all the lights and colours, from the dancing, from art and its makers. This is for you, backstage crew too cool and afraid to go on stage in the high school play, and you're more into Zeppelin anyway, man. For you, yearbook staff, town headbanger, geek girl, girly boy, boyly girl, young poets and painters, people who want to dance but don't know how, class clown and the shyest person in school, the one who says "journalist" so you don't have to explain "writer"; who says "commercial artist" to excuse your compulsive drawing, and so you don't have to say that you really want to leave this place and live in a garret far far away. For you, who wants to read Toni Morrison or Edna Robinson or Ursula K. Le Guin for your book club, or go into the Big City to see the Frida Kahlo exhibit and don't know what to say when people ask. "Why would you want to do that?"

This is for you, first generation of your family to go to university with the weight of that privilege and expectation, all that money spent on you, all that guilt, all that future to fill, and you know you'll have to pay somehow, but how? This is for you, thinking you're too old to take a class now that you are thirty-five, forty-five or fifty-five.

I see you making art out of almost nothing, out of your sheer will to make something of your own, something different from what you see every day. I see you finding books; I see you sewing and singing and making collages, staying late in art class, playing the piano for Sunday school. I see you playing D&D and Second Life and RPGs for the pleasure of becoming someone else, and you are relieved that you don't have to call it art and be shamed for it. I see you cooking and baking for the pleasure of making; I see you learning the names of birds and plants for their mellifluous, tongue-tripping beauty; I see you mucking out a calf's stall for the sweet smell of hay

and baby animal shit, for the calf's tangle of limbs in the morning. I see you running to listen to the rhythm of your breath, that heart music. I see you learning to speak the language of your ancestors. I see you saying the word *ancestors* with a dawning sense of your history.

I see you saying nothing when someone calls you a dreamer or a pansy or a fag or an airhead; a fluffball, a slut, a flake or just an idiot for thinking you could be more, do more, catch beauty in a jar, get out of this place, be something other than. I am thinking of you making art in unlikely and sometimes stringent circumstances: writing on your lunch hour, or taking photos with your phone, or curating books and films and paintings to declare what you love, or saving old beautiful things from the landfill, or kerning the lettering on an event poster. Special shout-out to those of you who have to listen to people all day telling you that it's not art, that it's banal, that it's more useless information, that the care you take and attention you give will add up to nothing. I will tell you this one thing in hope that it will help sustain you: you know what needs doing.

I see you, fat or bone-thin or just ordinary invisible; I see you with your perfect skin that will never be perfect enough; I see you rebel with every cause that you are not going to speak to because what's the point, who would hear you, Cassandra, Philomela, Tiresias; I see you getting a little older and a little older still; I see you push back against the beast; I hear you fight to breathe, clawing your way out of that lonely purgatory you fell into three or four or ten years ago when he hit you, or she left, or everyone laughed and never let you forget. I see you washing the dishes or mowing the lawn while he jeers, while she tells you that you are never leaving, while he says that he's the boss and can do whatever he wants to you. I see you, and I tell you that you deserve a life, a way out; you deserve your

body and brain working in concert with all the art ever made – every piece of music, every brush stroke, every high note, every leap into the air; every curve, muscle, swing, colour, shape and shadow. Every word.

Portraits of the Artists as Young Artsies

The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

– Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Every day, people make choices that work for their circumstances, which can include some or all of the following: the need to earn money, to stay safe, to raise children or care for the vulnerable, to advocate for justice, to pay rent, to eat, to learn other skills or ideas, to obtain a professional qualification and/or to respond to rapid change. Because these are real-life no-messing-around demands, the dream of the Big City art life has to remain a dream for some. But an artistic practice doesn't strictly need an urban context, and though that transformation from silence to language can seem fraught with danger, as Lorde notes, self-revelation can happen wherever you push against expectation. Sometimes those expectations are personal and sometimes they are cultural. The T-shirts that engineering students sometimes wear, declaring "Friends don't

let Friends become Artsies,” should be reckoned against all the people who STEMmed their way through life before deciding in their forties or fifties that their life really should have been dedicated to poetry, or the theatre, or painting. We should reclaim the term *Artsy* because there would be no culture without people who take time from all their other responsibilities to devote themselves to art. We should not let ourselves be disdained. We perform very valuable public functions, quite aside from making art. Artsies relieve people of the need to read everything. We’re the ones who obsess over harmonies or colour blends: we remember important dates and who wrote what.

Artsies are the makers of order where there is chaos. At a party, we might stay in a corner of the room, though anyone who invests in the cliché that all Artsies are introverts should watch poets dance. Granted, we are not always in the centre of things because we have other fish to fry; we are usually thinking of the next hour that we will have entirely to ourselves, to write down what we just saw or heard, or to draw it, paint it, sing it, play it, arrange and arrange and rearrange components endlessly on the page, screen, in our heads. Eventually, people will say to us, “How did you do that?” Or “How did you know that?” Or more simply, “Get out of my head.” If you live with an Artsy, get used to the sound of something brewing. To most people, it will sound like silence. You may be asked, “What is up with your in-house Artsy?” You don’t have to answer. Especially if you are the in-house Artsy.

The Artsy comes in all shapes and sizes and colours and ages and genders and sexes and cultures and backgrounds and ambitions and educations and desires and social classes. “How do I become a writer?” my students ask, a question reflected infinitely on social media by people older than my students – some with books, some without, some jockeying for position in the spring and fall book seasons, some arguing about style and coteries and reviewing,

some braving the hard truths about sexism and racism and violence. These are conversations by, for and about people who are fiercely devoted to ideas of what a writer could be or should be. Who is doing the work? Who is acknowledged as having done the work? Is the role of writer or artist changing in response to our world? There can never be one answer to this. In fact, the world in which there is only one answer to this is a world from which I would run screaming.

When I first saw Wes Anderson's *Rushmore*, I could not stop thinking that I was Max Fischer, only he had much more money and an Ivy League prep school backing him. That movie was about how Max didn't fit in, and I liked it – the mad genius plans, the over-the-top production values – even as I disbelieved every frame. His privilege was overwhelming to me. I know Wes Anderson writes elaborate fantasies, and that watching them and expecting realism is really not the way to get the most out of one of his films. This movie remains one of my favourites because of my disbelief, rather than in spite of it. It's classic wish fulfillment in Technicolor. No one would have made a movie about my art-geek life in high school, and I'll bet no one made one out of yours either. If you spend much time thinking about this, the ways that unspoken class privilege looms large in arts industries becomes clear: that almost immeasurable but definite whiff of the right to be here, the ability to attend the right events in the right place with the right people, where the right people you met at some other event introduce you to someone else who gives you your “big break.”

Writers dream of that cliché, too, as starry-eyed in our ways as anyone who has lit out for Hollywood, each of us thinking our own version of “and when my book's published, I'll be famous and admired!” Most of us won't admit to that because striving is uncool, as is ambition, as is sounding like you care. But my position as Duchess of the Perpetually Uncool grants me special powers, so I'm

saying it. If you've been in the literary world for decades, or grew up in it, you might bristle at the idea and object to this as an unfair characterization of your social life. Maybe so, but when you are an outsider, everything looks like a barrier designed to keep you out. This may or may not be a version of the garrison mentality, but it is definitely a manifestation of being out of line.

Poet and non-fiction writer Maureen Hynes lays it out plainly: "I do strongly believe class is a crucial factor, like gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ability (and how these commonly intersect with each other), in how comfortable people feel in entering a room of strangers, introducing oneself to others, in sharing written work or even speaking up in a class. In feeling like you have a place in this community and that people understand and accept who you are. In my work in the labour movement, I saw how deep-seated the intimidation, the mistrust or fear of education can be, how the educational system has a capacity to brutalize even the brightest of working-class children." Writer Liz Ukrainetz notes that a working-class background estranges people from "the cultural alphabet of the shapes and gestures of places, ideas and values," and that though she "received them peripherally through the cultural soup – *Star Trek*, Roger Ramjet, the Jackson Five, the Who . . . the difference between living beside a language, and living in it, is large."

Learning to make art – or learning to trust that you are making art – when you come from an artless place is not easy. In the hits and misses, we find the shape of our practice. But if you are coming from a place where art is not valued, or perhaps not recognized, it may not be so simple. Juno-winning dub poet and performer Lillian Allen, who has mentored hundreds of young artists, has the best advice for taking your own creative temperature: "your art will never be enough, but if you feel like nothing will be enough without you developing a practice and living a creative life, then you are

already an artist.” Poet and visual artist derek beaulieu contributed this quotation from visual artist Sister Corita Kent: “Find a place you can trust and then try trusting it for a while.”

It takes commitment to make your own artistic community, but people do it all the time. A quick look at writing communities across Canada yields many examples, including people who have built their communities within larger centres that demanded a more assimilative expression. One of the first poems I ever heard Lillian Allen perform was “Nelly Belly Swelly” at the World of Music, Arts, and Dance Festival at the Shipdeck Stage at Toronto’s Harbourfront in 1988. It was my first experience with dub poetry. Lillian owned the stage; she was mesmerizing. A few years later, when I had started to write, I saw a notice for the launch of her book *Women Do This Every Day* at the Poor Alex in Toronto’s Annex, and I went, craving more of her voice and confidence. That was the night I heard her perform “One Poem Town,” a poem in which Lillian unpacked the whiteness of the Toronto literary scene and I was amazed that someone could do that: work in the scene, criticize it and make one’s own art at the same time. I was a bit old for this kind of awakening, but it was a lesson I would need to learn again and again. She was completely right about the narrowness of the literary scene, but I had never heard anyone say it aloud before and I started to think about my own narrow definitions of writing. If Lillian was out there, working and changing things, who else was? Who else had I missed because, like the working-class girl I am, I was so focused on conventionality?

My experience of hearing Lillian happened in a big city, but it just as easily could have happened in a smaller place: in fact, smaller places offer these kinds of challenges to “mainstreamed” culture all the time, often by virtue of being geographically isolated. For instance, Halifax has a thriving spoken word scene led by former Municipal

Poet El Jones and current Municipal Poet Rebecca Thomas, both with powerful feminist voices and strong roots in their communities. Jones and Thomas make it their business to create socially conscious art that discusses Black lives and Mi'kmaq lives on the East Coast. In Kitchener-Waterloo, Janice Lee, Beth Murch, Bashar Jabbour and Ashley Hommel-Hynd draw the crowds at KW Poetry Slam, bringing in guest readers from all across Canada. Lee's 2018 film *The Legend of Sing Hey* is a documentary about her search throughout Canada for writers and musicians who are Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), often finding them living as artmakers in small centres. If you've not encountered it before, the term *BIPOC* is very useful; it gestures to structural inequities shared by people with these identities yet it also separates and differentiates those communities and their histories. It's similar in some ways to how the term *LGBTQ* indicates solidarity among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer folks without implying that their politics or challenges are exactly the same. And across Canada, other out-of-line places have found ways to bring together writers to practice arts in grassroots, self-generated communities. In Winnipeg, Cree writer Duncan Mercredi and a long list of Indigenous writers have been meeting to write and mentor young writers via the Indigenous Writers Collective since the 1980s. Further north, Saskatchewan Poet Laureate Brenda Schmidt runs a northern reading series in Flin Flon, Manitoba, called Ore Samples, in honour of the city's mining heritage. Calgary has fostered enough experimental and avant-garde writers in the last two decades that derek beaulieu and rob mclennan brought them all together in an anthology called, with sly seriousness, *The Calgary Renaissance*. For ten years, on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the Thursdays Writing Collective brought together a diverse group of people from the neighbourhood and beyond to write and create a literary community, coordinated by Amber Dawn and Elee Kraljii Gardiner. In

Victoria, Planet Earth Poetry continues to bring together a diverse group of writers, including guests from all over the country.

But even with all this evidence of small-place arts communities, the dynamics of belonging and not belonging are complex. How do we begin? Sometimes we just want to know if what we want is even possible. Whitehorse writer Joanna Lilley noted that when she first started writing, she “wanted to know that I wasn’t being ridiculous, audacious or pretentious to dream that I could be a writer. I wanted to know how to do it. How to magically transform myself into someone who was worthy enough and skilled enough to have my name on a book. How did one learn to write? I wanted to know it was okay to say out loud that I wanted to be a writer but I don’t think I even had the confidence to articulate that question.” Confidence is key, and so is environment, and sometimes you can’t control either. Poet and novelist Jeanette Lynes was acutely aware that her early education in visual art wouldn’t get her into a university program to study more – not for lack of trying, but “a rural high school couldn’t provide up-to-the-minute art instruction. I loved colour, and would have benefitted from colour theory, and more instruction but resources for this were not available in Grey County, or, at least none that I knew of. Geographical isolation was a big factor.”

Sometimes being first-generation Canadian, or a first-generation artist of any kind, comes with the price of estrangement from art that is rooted in cultural tradition. Songwriter and poet Janice Lee notes: “I never read my mom’s poetry because it was in Korean and my Korean was not good enough to understand it.” Writer and spoken word artist Meharoona Ghani saw art rooted in language and female social practice: “At times, my mother sang songs in our language. She played a dholki (a South Asian drum) for wedding parties. I viewed her as an artist... I remember going to ‘ladies’ parties, associated with South Asian weddings where there was a lot of traditional dance and singing. Found these to be fun. Community driven. Woman driven.

Women empowered.” Ghani adds that the consumerism of these arts (in both the northern and southern hemispheres) spurred her to take them up in order to return them to their roots. Observing the appropriation of henna and Indian classical dance by consumers of diverse backgrounds, Ghani notes, “we saw how our long-held arts were being used by folks to make money out of it.”

Jane Eaton Hamilton, writer and photographer, reminded me that a change in physical capacity is an often-overlooked reason to become an artist: “I wouldn’t have been an artist at all if I had not become disabled, but rather a scientist working in animal communication. Writing would have remained an occasional hobby.” Kim Clark also noted that experiencing physical changes in her body brought her to art: “I was diagnosed with MS at forty-three. An uncertain future with progressing disability drove me back to high school, college and to university for a degree based on the gonzo idea and pursuit of writing because, I thought, ‘What else will I physically be able to do, while dispelling the myth that was me?’” But for all the sense of discovery in art as a way to extend a body beyond its limitations, Hamilton notes that with those limitations, real-world marginalization from community often follows: “My disability, besides having an impact on my finances, also meant I couldn’t attend the workshops and classes where other writers met mentors/built connections to last them a lifetime.” Memoirist and activist Dorothy Palmer agrees: “Currently, my biggest obstacle is the pervasive, systemic ableism of CanLit culture. The expectation of being able-bodied is built right into the writing life, a requirement to network, promote and publicize your book.” The expectation of having time, money and the ability to travel to research, network or promote your work is an assumption of privilege and adds an extra distance to life as an out-of-line artist.

You can see that people in all kinds of circumstances and with all kinds of backgrounds have already figured out ways to make

lives that sustain the making of art, and that begins in many ways with a focus on what it could look like to start here and now. Training programs are great, but what is necessary for us all is to place ourselves at the centre of the inquiry into forging an artistic practice. I like the way that poet (and my former student) Kyleen McGrath puts it: “What do I have to teach myself?” To offer a personal example, I can still see the paper from the Sage Hill Writing Retreat that arrived at my Toronto apartment in 1995, which noted this as the first item on a list of advice: “Develop an appetite for revision.” In my memory, the words glow and pulse on the page, though of course that is merely a fanciful image that I’ve polished over time. But that phrasing dug in for me: I liked that I didn’t have to be good at it or have the right references or have read the right books or have someone powerful (oh my God, who?) advocate for me. All I had to do was learn to crave revision the way I craved a million other things that were beyond my star. I read that sentence and smiled. I was made of craving, and I could learn to crave revision.

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Considering the process as a reward is decent advice, especially when you are starting out, because the rewards will be few at first: intelligent eyes on your work, someone who says, “this is good!” or a reading or installation or performance with a small audience. Practicing patience with yourself will bolster you in lean times, and there are always going to be lean times, financially or psychologically. My instructors and mentors and senior peers advised – strongly – that we feed our artistic practices and not our often-fragile egos. When you are beginning, this can be a fine distinction. But if the process were all the reward anyone needed, why would anyone publish? Sing for an audience? Act in a play? For me, seven books in and with twenty-five years of magazine and journal publishing, I will say that having faith in an audience is a skill. Everyone needs

their own proportion of process and audience. I don't know what your proportion will be like, but you can reasonably expect it to shift throughout your artistic life. When you are a beginner artist, the shock of having an audience can be as great as the delight of it.

An extremely smart friend once told me that she was trying to calculate what kind of encouragement and approbation would be enough for her. She pictured a concert scenario: a stadium of people cheering, howling their approval, roaring out their love for her and her work; and even as she pictured it, she thought, "it's not enough." She also knew that the chances of her getting that arena full of people cheering were slim; she wasn't a rock star or a professional athlete. Sometimes we write for love, for approval or for admiration. This is may not be 100 per cent psychologically healthy, but it is perfectly normal. There needs to be something else driving your art, because not everyone will love your work and not everyone will approve of or admire you. Some people may even think your work is bad. Others may sit up and take notice; they may say, "Wait – what's this?" when they read what you've written. And that's who you are looking for, and who you are writing to, at least at the start: your people, your peers, your readers.

If you grew up like Lena Dunham, the offspring of radical artists, or even just in a house with lots of books and art and tickets to concerts and plays, you've probably met your fair share of artists, and the mystery of how to be one was answered for you early. But if you grew up like I did, in a small town or a culturally squeezed suburb, and have just started to think about how to see more art so you can make more art, it's possible you've never met an actor or a painter or someone who says that they publish poetry. Sometimes I catch beginner writers watching me in my alienness. I know that my ordinary exterior tests their belief in what an artist looks and sounds like. This feeling of being under a microscope comes with the territory; it happens all the time to artists who work as instructors, but

it also happens to any artist who is generous with their time. I come under a certain kind of scrutiny because I may be the first published writer some of my students have met, though I rarely seem “writerly.” This could mean any number of things, but it starts with the fact that I look – how shall I say this accurately and with kindness? – unremarkable. I’m white, middle-aged and cisgendered. I am not glamorous. Perhaps it is most accurate to say that I don’t look much like a culturally approved image of a female artist. It is a truth annoyingly and universally acknowledged that male writers can look like they live on beer and pickles and haven’t bought shoes in a decade or more, but female writers (especially when they appear in public) had better dress and photograph like models. There is a good deal of performing writerliness that happens in arts communities, and this too often relies on rules of attractiveness, ability and normativity in ways that reduce the potential for the art to speak to the realities of people’s lives. Because it ought to be all about the art. The Duchess of Uncoolness speaks: it is a function of my experience and my privilege, as someone who makes most of their income from teaching, that I don’t enact many of those performances anymore. I perform writing by writing, or by talking to other people about their writing. I sometimes think beginner writers are waiting for my bland exterior to melt away and reveal the leather-clad, long-haired, chain-smoking artist within. Artists don’t need to dress in any special way, and bestselling authors usually resemble rumpled people who sit in front of a keyboard for eight hours a day: bad backs, taut Achilles tendons, loose mud-coloured clothing. If you have the confidence to sign your art on your body in some way, it can draw other artists to you like a lighthouse beacon. Your courage can embolden others in a small community, or a new community.

At one point in time, I was gloriously pretentious, and if you’ve read this far, you have earned a story about my youthful artistic pretension. My errors are only good for the examples that they provide;

they are otherwise sitting around doing nothing. I was eighteen and fresh from acting in a string of semi-professional local productions when I met my friend W. I saw a play he was performing in, and because I was full of overweening self-confidence, I went backstage to introduce myself. *How* full of overweening self-confidence? I told W that I was an actor myself and I really enjoyed his performance. This was true enough, though all about me: offering a review like he was dying for my good opinion. For what it's worth, I had enjoyed his performance; he was easily the funniest actor in the show. The play was *Enter Laughing*, and W was much funnier in a secondary role than the lead guy playing the young comedian. Having made my pronouncement from on high to the stunned but complemented W, I then made a dramatic exit in a swirl of whatever flowing get-up I had effected that week and disappeared into the night. I met W again a month later, at the start of the university term, when we ended up in the same theatre history class. I waved at him across the room and his brow furrowed. When the class ended, he appeared at my elbow and said, "I thought you were an actor. But you're just a kid like me." Caught in my own pretensions but still determined to define myself as an artist, I replied: "I am an actor – and I'm a kid like you." When I think about it now, I feel equal parts embarrassment at my pretentiousness and pride at my strong sense of artistic selfhood. I knew that if I was going to make any kind of attempt to get the hell outta Dodge, I needed practice. W was my friend for the next fifteen years, until he died when we were both just thirty-three. He was way too young, but this was during the era of the AIDS epidemic. I miss him and how he would laugh when he told the story of how we met, which he did whenever anyone asked. It's good to have friends who have known you for a long time and don't hate you for your errors. It's good to have community.