

THE WRITER ON, AND AT, HER WORK – URSULA K. LEGUIN

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Her work
is never done.
She has been told that
and observed it for herself.

Her work
spins unrelated filaments
into a skein: the whorl
or wheel turns the cloudy mass
into one strong thread,
over, and over, and over.

Her work
weaves unrelated elements
into a pattern: the shuttle
thrown across the warp
makes roses, mazes, lightning,
over, and over, and over.

Her work
brings out of dirt and water
a whole thing, a hole where
the use of the pot is,
a container for the thing
contained, a holy thing, a holder,
a saver,
happening on the clayey wheel
between her and her clayey hands,
over, and over, and over.

Her work
is with pots and baskets,
bags, cans, boxes, carryalls,
pans, jars, pitchers, cupboards, closets,
rooms, rooms in houses, doors,
desks in the rooms in the houses,
drawers and pigeonholes in the desks,
secret compartments
in which lie for generations
secret letters.

Her work
is with letters,
with secret letters.
Letters that were not written
for generations.
She must write them
over, and over, and over.

She works with her body,
a day-laborer.
She labors, she travails,
sweating and complaining,
She is her instrument,
whorl, shuttle, wheel.
She is the greasy wool and the raw clay
and the wise hands
that work by day
for the wages of the worker.

She works within her body,
a night creature.
She runs between the walls.
She is hunted down and eaten.
She prowls, pounces, kills, devours.
She flies on soundless wings.

Her eyes comprehend the darkness.
The tracks she leaves are bloody,
and at her scream
everything holds still,
hearing that other wisdom

Some say any woman working
is a warrior.
I resist that definition.
A fighter in necessity, sure,
a wise fighter,
but a professional?
One of los Generales?
Seems to me she has better things
to do than be a hero.
Medals were made for flatter chests.
They sort of dangle off her tits
and look embarrassing.
The uniforms don't fit.
If she shoots from the hip,
she hears the freudians applauding—
See? See? they say,
See? See? She wants one!
(She wants mine!
She can't have it!
She can't can she Daddy? No, son.)
Others say she's a goddess,
The Goddess, transcendant,
knowing everything by nature,
the Archetype
at the typewriter.
I resist that definition.

Her work, I really think her work
isn't fighting, isn't winning,
isn't being the Earth, isn't being the Moon.
Her work, I really think her work
is finding what her real work is
and doing it,
her work, her own work,
her being human,
her being in the world.

So, if I am
a writer, my work
is words. Unwritten letters.

Words are my way of being
human, woman, me.
Word is the whorl that spins me,
the shuttle thrown though the warp of years
to weave a life, the hand
that shapes to use, to grace.
Word is my tooth,
my wing.
Word is my wisdom.

I am a bundle of letters
in a secret drawer
in an old desk.
What is in the letters?
What do they say?

I am kept here a prisoner by the evil Duke.

Georgie is much better now, and I have been canning peaches like mad.

I cannot tell my husband or even my sister, I cannot live without you, I think of you day and night, when will you come to me?

My brother Will hath gone to London and though I begg'd with all my heart to go with him nor he nor my Father would have it so, but laugh'd and said, Time the wench was married.

The ghost of a woman walks in this house. I have heard her weeping in the room that was used as a nursery.

If I only knew that my letters were reaching you, but there is no way to get information at any of the bureaux, they will not say where you have been sent.

Don't grieve for me. I know what I am doing.

Bring the kids and they can all play together and we can sit and talk till we're blue in the face.

Did he know about her cousin Roger and the shotgun?

I don't know if it's any good but I've been working on it since September.

How many of us will it take to hang him?

I am taking the family to America, the land of Freedom.

I have found a bundle of old letters in a secret compartment in my desk.

Letters of words of stories:
they tell stories.
The writer tells stories, the stories,
over, and over, and over.

Man does, they say, and Woman is.
Doing and being. Do and be.
O.K., I be writing, Man.
I be telling.
("Je suis la où ça parle,"
says la belle Hélène.)
I be saying and parlaying.
I be being
this way. How do I do being?
Same way I be doing.
I would call it working
or else, it doesn't matter, playing.

The writer at her work
is playing.
Not chess not poker not monopoly,
none of the war games—
Even if she plays by all their rules
and wins—wins what?
Their funny money?—
not playing hero,
not playing god—
well, but listen, making things
is a kind of godly business, isn't it?
All right, then, playing god,
Aphrodite the Maker, without whom

"nothing is born into the shining
borders of light, nor is anything lovely or lovable made,"
Spider Grandmother, spinning,
Thought Woman, making it all up,
Coyote Woman, playing—
playing it, a game,
without a winner or a loser,
a game of skill, a game of make
believe.

Sure it's a gamble,
but not for money.
Sorry Ernie this ain't stud.
The stakes
are a little higher.

The writer at her work
is odd, is peculiar, is particular,
certainly, but not, I think,
singular.
She tends to the plural.

I for example am Ursula; Miss
Ursula Kroeber;
Mrs. then Ms Le Guin;
Ursula K. Le Guin; this latter is
"the writer," but who were,
who are, the others?
She is the writer
at their work.

What are they doing,
those plurals of her?
Lying in bed.
Lazy as hound dogs.
She-Plural is lying in bed
in the morning early.
Long before light, in winter;
in summer "the morning people
are chirping on the roof."
And like the sparrows
her thoughts go hopping
and flying and trying out words.
And like the light of morning
her thought impalpably touches
shape, and reveals it,
brings seeing from dimness,
being from inexhaustible chaos.

That is the good time.
That is the time when this she-plural writer
finds what is to be written.
In the first light,
seeing with the eyes
of the child waking,
lying between sleep and the day
in the body of dream,
in the body of flesh
that has been/is
a fetus, a baby, a child, a girl, a woman, a lover, a mother,
has contained other bodies,
incipient beings, minds unawakened, not to awaken,
has been sick, been damaged, been healed,
been old, is born and dying, will die,
in the mortal, inexhaustible
body

of her work:

That is the good time.

Spinning the fleece of the sun, that cloudy mass,
weaving a glance and a gesture,
shaping the clay of emotion:
housekeeping. Patterning.
Following patterns.
Lying there
in the dreamtime
following patterns.

So then you have to cut it out—
take a deep breath,
the first cut, the blank page!—
and sew it together (drudgery,
toil in the sacred sweatshop),
the garment, the soul-coat,
the thing made of words,
cloth of the sunfleece,
the new clothes of the Emperor.

(Yes, and some kid comes along
and yaps, "But he hasn't any clothes on!"
Muzzle the brat
till it learns
that none of us has any clothes on,
that our souls are naked,
dressed in words only,
in charity only,
the gift of the others.
Any fool can see through it.
Only fools say so.)

Long ago when I was Ursula
writing, but not "the writer,"
and not very plural yet,
and worked with the owls not the sparrows,
being young, scribbling at midnight:

I came to a place
I couldn't see well in the darkness,
where the road turned
and divided, it seemed like,
going different ways.
I was lost.
I didn't know which way.
It looked like one road sign said To Town
and the other didn't say anything.

So I took the way that didn't say.
I followed
myself.
"I don't care," I said,
terrified.
"I don't care if nobody ever reads it!
I'm going *this* way."

And I found myself
in the dark forest, in silence.

You maybe have to find yourself,
yourselves,
in the dark forest.

Anyhow, I did then. And still now,
always. At the bad time.

When you find the hidden catch
in the secret drawer
behind the false panel
inside the concealed compartment
in the desk in the attic
of the house in the dark forest,
and press the spring firmly,
a door flies open to reveal
a bundle of old letters,
and in one of them
is a map
of the forest
that you drew yourself
before you ever went there.

The Writer At Her Work:
I see her walking
on a path through a pathless forest,
or a maze, a labyrinth.
As she walks she spins,
and the fine thread falls behind her
following her way,
telling
where she is going,
where she has gone.
Telling the story.
The line, the thread of voice,
the sentences saying the way.

The Writer On Her Work:
I see her, too, I see her
lying on it.
Lying, in the morning early,
rather uncomfortable.
Trying to convince herself
that it's a bed of roses,
a bed of laurels,
or an innerspring mattress,
or anyhow a futon.
But she keeps twitching.

There's a *lump*, she says.
There's something
like a *rock*—like a *lentil*—
I can't sleep.

There's something
the size of a split pea
that I haven't written.
That I haven't written right.
I can't sleep.

She gets up
and writes it.
Her work
is never done.