

Hardscrabble*

by Lisa Allen-Agostini (Trinidad and Tobago)

Start with TALENT.

Of little value but it earns extra
as an opening word.

POET, in the right spot,
is worth very little, POETRY
If you can make it, scores higher.

FICTION scores well.

could ensure your win
if placed in the right spot.

HOME is worth almost nothing.

You can make POOR on top of it,
using POETRY in both.

You make HOMED and HARD
in a single turn.

You've run out of some letters now.

This is your game. You made it what it is.

Elsewhere you could have formed FAME and RICH
though not BREATH or TIME.

ECONOMY, with luck and graft,
could yield a good amount
(but I did say you needed luck and graft).

Try making SCREEN off ECONOMY
for double points.

SCREEN opens up the board, too.

Instead of HARD/HOMED play TEACHING.

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It earns a bonus, though it uses all your tiles.
But who knows what you'll pull next?
LINK might be an option.
maybe KIDS, depending on
who you play with.
You can't make TRAVEL, PRIZES,
PUBLISHERS or REVIEWS
With what you have in hand.

Alas, those are the tiles you drew
and this is the game you've played.
Your last word, at the top: WRITE.
Let me know
if you win
or lose.

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In Search of Balance: Between Living and Writing Putra Hidayatullah (Indonesia)

SO HERE HE IS, a so-called writer named Putra Hidayatullah. I bear witness: when he sat down to write this piece, he found his mind as blank as paper. He finds the question of how to balance life as an artist easy for him, but the answer is so complicated. Especially when he asks himself, what if his own life is not in balance? Or thicker question: what is balance?

Deep in his heart, he's basically eager to invite the audience into this conversation, seeking their insights to help him uncover a more complete answer. To begin, perhaps, he will share his own part. He's honest in saying that, for him, balancing writing and living is like trying to balance eating and breathing. Both are necessary; is there any way to separate them?

At a quick glance (please forgive him for this sort of simplification), what he understands from today's topic isn't far from the balance between stomach and brain. Everyone knows they are related, like cloud and rain. The stomach is

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something we need to fill (relatively) daily. It needs food and all it contains: nutrition, and so on. So does the brain.

Back in his hometown of Banda Aceh, Putra remembers well when people used to say that logic requires logistics. Like here, we have pizza. It's good not only to satisfy hunger but also for motivation. Every time I imagine a Friday panel discussion, I imagine pieces of pizza waiting for me. And it always magically gives me energy. I wish Friday came every day.

In short, it is difficult to think clearly on an empty stomach. But, according to Putra Hidayatullah—at least from what he has learned from himself—humans are complicated. They need more than just what their stomachs demand. He couldn't agree more with a thinker, whose name he forgot, who once said, "Humans are the only creatures that need justification for their existence." Why do we live?

Six years before he sits in front of you today, Putra found himself flying in the sky. He was not alone. With him were emptiness, sorrow, anxiety, guilt, worthlessness, unending fatigue, and

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dozens of sleepless nights. The rest were passengers of the same airplane. Hours passed. Unexpectedly, extreme turbulence occurred. Fear flashed in their eyes. While other passengers prayed to stay alive, Putra didn't mind dying. He was tired of life.

It was one of those dark days when his mind and soul were chained by ideological power in the society until he decided to leave his hometown of Banda Aceh for the unknown. He spent days and nights on the streets. He moved from one island to another in Indonesia, having intense conversations with his depressed mind. Destiny then led him to a meditation camp at the foot of a great mountain in Java. Many weeks later, he understood what he deeply needed. It was freedom.

Has he found it? He still sometimes finds it difficult to stand at the crossroads, especially when facing a dominant narrative and values that he disagrees with. There are times when his mouth is expected to say yes, while his heart says no. Not rarely does he feel tortured, crying inside. He is trapped between the desire to make change and the powerlessness to do so. But

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writing gives him hope. He is able to write different stories.

To sustain his life as a writer, he wears many hats. He teaches at the university, nurturing young minds, while the art of translation allows him to bridge worlds through language. Curating art brings him close to creation in other forms, as he weaves together stories through the work of others. These roles are not just how he lives, but how he feeds his spirit, so that he may continue to write. In each, he finds echoes of the stories that long to be told, each task another thread in the fabric of his creative existence

He calls this the invention of himself. This gives him the reason to live. His needs later go beyond his stomach. He needs to articulate the melodious stories buried in his heart. He needs to release all the emotional reactions stored inside him by painful realities. There's anger, there's hatred, there's sadness—but there's also love, which he needs to share with other living beings.

After sharing all this with you, my brothers and sisters, how would Putra answer the question of

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how to balance living and writing? What if writing becomes a reason to live? But then, where does balance fit in? Should the act of writing be seen as separate from the act of living? Could anyone from this respected audience help him with this? He would love to be your listener. Thank you!

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I want to rest my cheek on the imaginary line that separates art from life
Mélanie Werder Avilés (Spain)

The playwright says:

As a playwright I live in a crack that is getting smaller every day.
The *classic* Mr.Know-It-All-Character enters and says:

Excuse me, just one little disclaimer.
How do we know this woman is an artist? Does her way to
clean the bathroom differs from mine?
We need evidence!

(Silence)

He leaves, slamming the door.

The playwright continues:

Right now, in my crack, I play, write and stretch the real to bind it onstage.
On the other hand, the virtual universe puts a lot of pressure on the notion of
“reality”.

Because the digital is swallowing us. And we protect ourselves making a
sun visor with our hands, like this.

(She makes the gesture)

And the gesture lengthens; it is now a shield that tries to protect our body, our
art, our life, the theater against the pixel. It’s impossible.

The essence of drama writing, as it comes to me, is collective. The physical
gesture of typing can be intimate, nor are the fluctuations of details surrounding
it.

My life fits in the gap that I make for creative self by making the shape of

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binoculars with my hand. I need to capture images being shoulder to shoulder to other bodies, other persons, other ideas while I write.

What is the notion of life? And of togetherness?

(Pausa) (Silencio.) (A beat)

In my writing I ask what I'd like to know. I write what I'd like to see. I don't want to miss the point. Great scenes, a sense of theatre, dialogue. New artistic devices for shared feelings. But the old shapes of the real knock me every minute in my screen. Is that life? How does an artist respond to a real-life streamed genocide? Where is balance? Where is the liaison with the young trans-women pouring my sweet overpriced matcha latte and this wounded child, detached jaw, staring at me?

What is the point of the concept "great-scene" while we are bombarded

In our feed with Botox, sex, war, kittens, keep scrolling, outfits, house tour, secret gem, Stanley cups, election day,

gender reveal, scroll, keep scrolling,

terrorist attack, eating the cats, eating the dogs,

keep scrolling, Taylor's version, Ozempic, changes, *we scroll, we scroll, we scroll, we scroll, we scroll*, doom scrolling, doom scrolling, doom scroll?

The playwright breathes.

Balancing art and life is not only losing the focus, but prioritizing the act of listening.

Escucha activa. Active listening. When I was acting, that was the main task. As an artist, you are not alone in this world.

Listening to others is also dramaturgy, listening to others is a discourse and it is mine. I am very interested in language, in the use of dramatic writing for this political and painful crack.

I believe that theater can transform intimacy just as it does on the internet.

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Can theatrical language transform reality as social networks do?

I want to rest my cheek on the imaginary line that separates art from life.
That gesture is a word on a stage. Let's keep pushing, writer friends.
In spite of everything.
Our art is portable, fragile, difficult. Political by the mere fact of existing.
I don't know what my life as an artist is like, I just know that I can't stop writing.
I can't afford it. I write because saltwater flows from my fingertips.

(Beat)

I think about all that I will type throughout my life.
I imagine those words in line, like waiting to get into a pub.
My texts waiting, peeing, wanting to throw up, wanting to flirt, wanting to leave,
asking for a puff, wanting the party to be just as life promised.
I don't know what the poem is but I neither recite it nor vomit it, I surround it, I
breathe it, I circumcise it, I circumambulate it.
I am alive and it is enough for me.
I am alive and I love, and it is enough for me.
I am alive and I write, and I have language, and I love, and it is enough for me.
I am alive and I write, and I have the language and the imagination and the
pleasure and the desire and the body and I love, and it is enough for me.
I am alive, I have been alive for thirty-two years and nothing is enough for me.
Balance: writing drama without losing focus.
Balance: being awake, being bold, being uncomfortable.

(Beat)

Tomorrow: everything.
Starting tomorrow we are going for it all.

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My Two Worlds
Daryl Li (Singapore)

In university, I choose to do an Engineering degree, having been guided by years of societal and familial expectation. During my first year, I suddenly develop a rebellious personality and announce that I want to switch tracks to undertake the most subversive and recalcitrant of all degrees instead—which is, of course, Literature. My mother and I don’t speak for a month, maybe two. For the first time in his career as a parent, my father finds himself in the role of a mediator. My mother’s concerned—terrified, even—that her son will never find a job. I too am concerned, but I decide that this is the hill that I’ll die on—a foolish man with his joke taken too far.

*Use your head, can’t you,
use your head, you’re on
Earth, there’s no cure for
that!*
—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

I actually finish my Engineering degree, but then imprudently decide to pursue advanced degrees in the humanities: a Master’s degree in Literary Studies, then a PhD concentrating in Film Studies. I feel confident of doing well, but there’s also a perpetual sense of ennui. In Roberto Bolaño’s 2666, a few literary critics enjoy a bohemian lifestyle while on their quest to find the elusive writer Arcimboldi. There’s a line that says something to the effect of critics being writers who couldn’t cut it as writers. I think of this constantly as I embark on my PhD, with self-deprecating aspirations to become a film critic. As the old turn of phrase goes, “Those who can’t, teach.”

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*All of us have one vital lie,
without which routine
would collapse; mine
consisted of simulacra, in
this case of literature.*

—Sergio Chejfec, *My Two*

Worlds

Tr. Margaret B. Carson

I don't teach. I don't become a critic. Instead, I look back today at my employment history and think about my failure to fully embrace my interest in literature, the humanities, or a creative life.

As I take a low-paying job at a call center answering enquiries about power bills, I'm working on the craft of fiction. I'm a Research Assistant in Geography and Sociology when I'm figuring out the promise of the essay. I'm finding my literary voice as I also find my feet in a nonprofit organization.

I write during the weekends. I write deep into the night. I put my money into experimental events and nonviable publishing projects. I

*Now/I'm wakin' at the
crack of dawn/to send a
little money home/from
here/to the moon*

—David Byrne, "Glass,
Concrete & Stone"

try to balance the high cost of living with my impractical creative aspirations. I resist dissenting voices that say it's unrealistic, a profound waste of time.

These are my two worlds.

I don't have any secrets to share with you. I don't make a living

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writing. In Singapore, that's rarely possible. I work a day job and try to fulfil my responsibilities as much as I try to live the life I want. It's always a struggle—it is for everyone. I save as much money as I can. I apply for as many grants as I find. I celebrate every small success. I squeeze as much time out of my schedule as I can manage. I find that last bit of energy in me to do one more thing. I learn to rely on those around me, and in turn, try to become someone others can count on as well. I do my best to keep the writing alive. These are my two worlds.

*I was champing hope
between my teeth;
I despaired, with dazzled
eyes...
ah, alive, I was alive!*
—Nakahara Chūya, from
"Boyhood", tr. Paul
Mackintosh and Maki
Sugiyama

But between my two worlds, there is another truth. As a friendship falters, I meditate on it through writing. When a loved one passes, I compose an elegy. Against the senseless disasters of the world, I try to make sense anew. In moments of grief, heartbreak, in the decay and blossoming of friendships, in times of personal crisis and global catastrophes, how do I understand the world? How do I understand myself? For me, writing is a way of being and becoming. It's also a method through which I can hope to be attentive to the Other—a person, a community, a side of myself I can barely understand. It's what allows me to resist the everyday that grinds me down, wears me out. After so many years of trying to balance the living with the writing, I

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think that sometimes it is all right to admit that the writing can be the living in itself.

It's just what you do. You become one with that.
—Rodney Mullen

A few weeks ago, discussing my experience in Iowa, a friend of mine said that it sounded as if I had seen a lot of growth in just three or four weeks. I joked that I had indeed grown a little fatter, a little poorer—though I secretly agreed with him.

Since coming to Iowa, I have met great poets, good people, and the most generous of friends. I have heard voices that inspired, read writing that I've fallen in love with. Through the process, I have found my feet in a broader picture, realized how my work and ideas can fit into a wider conversation. I am starting to find a way of being in the world that suits me.

I am beginning to understand the potency and potential of a prospective artistic life. I am starting to appreciate that I can admit to being a writer. I am learning that writing can be more than just something I do, that it is okay to say that I am indeed a writer, that that is the way I choose to walk through this world, to reach the other, to find a human touch in increasingly difficult times.

It has taken me perhaps too long to become comfortable with the notion that, yes, I am a writer. I choose to be a writer. I choose to live by being a writer.

That is, above all, I am learning that it is all right to say yes.

If you get a calling as an artist, you have to do your work.
—Patti Smith

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Suppose every act of writing was personal, every sentence a secret, a perpetual struggle to say the first word and then the second. Suppose I could speak to you, reach you free of masks, Suppose literature was a possibility, a dialogue between me and my reality, me and my other me, and you. Suppose it was the bridge between my two worlds or perhaps a middle space that accommodates an in-between to inhabit from which to listen to embrace. Suppose a sentence could connect us.

Suppose this was a letter, an invitation, a question. I keep writing in search of liveness, living aliveness. The beginnings of conversations, a response. I keep writing in search of you, in search of the interstitial between these two worlds from which we may begin to speak, in which we can begin to hear each other, an invitation to which you might say, could say, will say, yes, perhaps yes, yes.

*So it is that as I slowly let
go, or perhaps that it
gradually slips away from
me, this codex protects,
continues to protect,
before it is lost forever, a
universe and its darkness
and silence, a distance
overcome, the never-night
in which you respond to it,
saying yes, perhaps yes, yes.
—Daryl Li, “Solaris”, 2015*

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