

WRITING HOME

SETTING OUT ONCE MORE: on getting older, writing books and deepening beliefs

From the first issue of *Writing Home*, a Blog / Newsletter from [Dougald Hine](https://dougald.substack.com/p/setting-out-once-more)
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At the end of my first year at university, I borrowed a flat for the summer above a shop on the seafront in the Scottish fishing town of Anstruther. The flat belonged to my friend Owen's great uncle who had gone into a care home. Another member of the family was running the shop, but the rooms upstairs were sitting empty, and I had told myself that this was what I needed. So my dad drove me up with two boxes of books, a box of tinned food and an ageing desktop computer that I set up on the table in the front room.

I'd never lived by the sea before. The moods of sky and water and weather were my companions, the tides and the big stars on clear nights. Gulls surfed the wind outside my window. Boy racers revved their engines along Shore Street. One afternoon, I saw a man tarred and feathered, then taken off on a truck, in what I had to hope was a stag ritual. Mostly life was quiet, though. On nights when the tide was out, I'd walk along the harbour wall and listen to the barnacles whispering. That's how quiet it could be.

I had come here to write, but there was a flaw in this plan. The flaw was that I was twenty and had yet to live enough or shake off enough of my education to find a voice or have anything to say. There are people who have written and published books at twenty. I even knew one – in our first term at university, a friend had sold his first novel for a headline-making advance – which may explain why this undertaking seemed plausible at the time. But of the book I tried to write that summer, I remember almost nothing, and no evidence now remains. Instead, the trail that has led me back to Anstruther is made of other people's words.

Among the boxes I brought with me, there was a book that began to speak to me in those weeks of solitude. I savoured its words and they opened my senses. I took it with me on walks along the coastal paths to nearby villages, or to sit alone in the bar of the Dreel Tavern. It was one of those encounters with a book that breaks you open, that opens a door you didn't know was there – and the strange thing is, when I went back and began to reread it this autumn, I could find little trace of the door that it once opened. The opening was not in the book, I suppose, but in myself, and it closed behind me long ago.

At the time, though, and for months or years afterwards, this encounter coloured my conversations and I puzzled anyone who would listen with my new-found enthusiasm. Among the first of these would have been my dad, as he drove me south again at the end of August. And it was somewhere on that journey that he said it, the sentence that

comes back to me now more strongly than anything I wrote or read that summer: 'I find that the older I get, the fewer things I believe, but the more deeply I believe them.'

The older I get, I think – and it hits me that twenty-five years has gone by, or near enough, since the summer I failed to write a book in Anstruther. When we had that conversation, my dad would only have been a couple of years older than I am now.

I found a voice and lived some more and had some things to say. By my thirties, much of the work I was doing seemed to start from and return to the words I wrote. I began to make part of my living from writing. Now and then, I would hear from readers for whom my words had opened a door.

Still, over the years, more than one writer has told me, friendly but in seriousness, 'You can't call yourself a writer, Dougald, when you've never actually written a book!' And though I could point to half a shelf of books with my name on the cover or the contents page, it's true that, up to now, none of these had been a full-length solo effort.

Then, last autumn, a series of conversations lit a fuse – and a blaze of writing and rewriting followed through the first half of this year, until on Thursday 28 July, at a quarter to eight in the evening, I put the last full stop on the final draft of a book of the kind my writer friends had been getting at. Before we come to what the book is about, perhaps you can join me in savouring that moment. My family, in their wisdom, had gone away for a couple of nights, so I was alone. I stepped out into the last of the evening sunshine and opened a can of beer. It tasted good.

This book, then: it is called *At Work in the Ruins* and it will be published in February on both sides of the Atlantic by Chelsea Green. I have plenty to tell you about it, but I will save most of that for a future instalment. For now, I want to linger a little over the writing of books and the deepening of beliefs.

The same friend who sold his first novel during our first term at university went on to rent an old dove tower on a country estate in the Cotswolds and this became a retreat in the years around and after graduation. I realise that I have rarely written or spoken about this chapter of my life, a chapter that seems borrowed from someone else's life, as though I went around wearing clothes that clearly didn't fit. There had been no shortage of privilege in my life before university, but this was another world.

In the big house on the estate lived a famous fashion journalist, an extraordinary and ultimately tragic figure. She had taken my friend under her wing and arranged for him to rent the converted dove tower. Sometimes, in the afternoon, there would be a knock at the door and there she was with whoever had come down to visit that weekend, out for a walk across the fields, dressed in muddy wellies and outlandish couture.

I remember a conversation on one of those afternoons when she spoke of her depression with a frankness I was unprepared for in someone twice my age. 'Do you

suffer, too?’ she wondered, and then she looked into my eyes for a moment, as though trying to identify their exact colour. ‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re more mercurial, I think.’

Like plenty of things people said to me at that age, I hardly knew what to do with this, but I never forgot it. Then, a long while later, I heard something similar from a different source.

It was Martin Shaw, the storyteller and mythographer, one night at the kitchen table in his cottage in Devon. We were talking about Dark Mountain. He’d been a good friend to the project, from its early years, and to Paul Kingsnorth and myself as the people who bore the responsibility for bringing it into the world. ‘You two are Mercury and Saturn,’ he told me now. ‘A powerful combination, but not an easy one.’

I don’t pretend to know much about the lore of the planets, but when a word comes at you like that, echoing across the years, it has a call on your attention. To be under the influence of Mercury is to be quick and changeable, given to sudden and surprising shifts of mood. It is also to have ‘qualities of eloquence, ingenuity, or thievishness’, the attributes of a go-between god, a trickster, a trafficker between worlds. And I recognise more of myself in that description than is comfortable. I’ve often been the one who makes connections, the quick-minded intermediary, the translator, talking a different language depending on who I’m with. This role can be a gift, when it’s in service to a larger cause. It can also be a way to lose yourself: switching so fluidly between different ways of talking that those who follow your words may wonder if you still know what cause you are serving, and you may come to wonder this yourself. It can betray you, too, when what is called for is straight talk, speaking up for others from the heart.

Trickster is a marvellous co-author, but he is not to be trusted and on his own he is unlikely to write a book. To cross the finish line, some other energy is called for. Italo Calvino told us as much: ‘I am a Saturn who dreams of being a Mercury, and everything I write reflects these two impulses.’ Mercury may bring inspiration, but the patience and persistence involved in writing a book belong to Saturn, the old, cold figure of order and commitment.

To write a book is to commit yourself in a way you can’t slip out of – no longer throwing out words on the fly and tuning your way of speaking to the audience and the moment, but making a statement that will stay fixed, that you will have to stand by when it appears in print, months or years later. That, at least, is the sensation I had as I went on with the writing of this book, and it offers one explanation for why it took me so long to reach this point.

You can write your way so far inside a book that it’s hard to say what the book is about. When it comes to *At Work in the Ruins*, I’m still finding my way back out again and learning to explain it in a way that will make sense to anyone but myself.

Running through the book is the story of what happened after Paul and I wrote the Dark Mountain manifesto, the role I came to play as a trafficker between worlds and the years

in which much of my work involved talking to people about climate change. It starts at a moment in the second year of the pandemic when I came to see this work in a different light.

This week, I have been going through the corrected proofs, the last chance as an author to catch any remaining slips before your book is sent to press. What struck me, rereading the whole thing in a few days, is how far the telling is shaped by my desire to cross the lines, to bridge between different sides of an argument or find a way to dissolve a fiercely maintained binary. This is a reflex that I cannot seem to shake off and I don't know that I'd want to. And yet, at the centre of the book I have written, there comes the moment of having to draw a line and say on which side of it I stand, even if this puts me in strange company.

I don't want to tell you too much more, just yet. Except that, after my time inside this book, I'm coming back to the form of the newsletter, curious as to what has changed.

When I started sending out *Crossed Lines*, I was thirty-seven, still recovering from the burnout of my London years, slowly arriving in a new country and about to become a father. The subject line of the first issue was a piece of advice I'd been given years earlier by a driver who picked me up when I was hitching to Edinburgh: 'Write your first book by the time you're thirty-seven!' Only seven years late, then.

So as my book heads off to the printers, there's an itch I've been wanting to scratch – to get back to the immediacy of write-and-hit-send, but also to step into the wider conversations I see going on in the space that Substack has opened up. As this series gets going, I'll introduce you to some of the writers whose words stir my thinking these days, whether through their newsletters, or elsewhere online, or in old books that I may puzzle you with my enthusiasm for.

The thread I want to follow is one that goes back to that conversation with my dad. Because, mainly to my relief, I too am getting older, and I find the question of belief comes calling more often these days. So I ask the man with the greying beard who looks back from the mirror: do you believe fewer things than you once did? Which of the beliefs you once held is it time to admit you have let go? Where are you willing to draw the line? What do you believe more deeply now than ever? And who do you find yourself alongside as a consequence?

As I put these questions down in writing, I notice a quiver of discomfort. There are lines of thought or intuition that I know I want to follow here, connections I think I can make out and a few pieces I already began to write, but I do not know where all of this is leading, what door it is going to open. It does not seem like an invitation to a quiet life. Not time to be gathering barnacles, or go listening to them again, just yet.

There's a lighthouse at the end of the harbour wall, a gap through which to leave its shelter, a strange-shaped mound on the far side of the firth. It seems that I am setting out once more.