

Why I Write

One month ago, I sat in the open trunk of a jeep as it roared around the edge of a man-made mirror lake in Northern India. I was visiting a family friend in Udaipur. They call it *The Lake City*. They call it *The Venice of the East*. When I opened my mouth, wind filled my throat and pushed my words away. We were going so fast. I was scared to death, but I know how to hide my fear. My friend shouted over the wind to explain that the city's suicide rate kept surging because the city's young girls, younger than me, kept killing themselves to escape arranged marriages.

The jeep raced faster. We chased our shadow on the new-paved road. A house flickered past. The lake hid behind a cloud of dust as we rounded a bend.

And then, suddenly, two school kids on a motorcycle came swerving fast in front of us.

Here's what I remember: They both wore navy uniforms, long sleeves and long pants, and it was hot as hell that day. The smiling boy sat in front. Behind him, the girl was clinging on for dear life. I remember that the girl's braids ended in purple bows. I noticed that the jeep's windshield framed them like a movie screen.

Her braids swung to the right as the motorcycle swerved to the left, skidding out of control, falling all the way to its side and moving fast forward, the metal whining as the motorcycle scraped against the new road.

For a long, long minute they skidded down the road, boy and girl and motorcycle. The traffic froze, watching, waiting, poised for disaster.

The motorcycle scraped to a stop, a mass of smoking metal. For a moment everything was still. And then—the girl stood up. The boy brushed the dust from his uniform pants, stood beside her, and grinned. The motorcycle was an unrecognizable wreck; the two of them, unscathed. Traffic zoomed on.

I could have been witness to disaster. But I wasn't. They got up! Instead, I was witness to a miracle.

And you know what? This is why I write.

I write to try to understand the nearness of good luck and calamity, the nearness of laughter and tears. I write to understand the uneasy flukes that have

made a few strangers into my friends while other lives remain opaque. I write to understand why I've been kept whole while other people have been broken to bits. I tend to pretend that I never get hurt. When I write, I know that's a lie. I write to tell the truth. I write to make sense of my smallness and the fragility of everything I love.

I write to think, and to know what I'm thinking. If I don't write, my brain skitters and swerves along doubtful trains of thought that spook at every distraction. But I know I can trust grammar to be my conductor, phonics my headlights. The shape and sound of a sentence can alchemically transform everyday language into black gold, inky fuel that pulls me through forests of memory to my present perceptions.

Until I try to put the world into words, I take it for granted. Maybe we all do. I don't notice the details unless I write. I don't bother to see a friend's urge to shut her eyes while she talks unless I write. I don't notice a waiter's slight limp unless I write. I don't notice the prism shadow of a droplet licking down an icicle unless I write. The details are there and they want to be seen; when I don't write, I sleepwalk through my waking life. When I write, I wake up.

I write to remember that beneath the mirror-surface of Udaipur's manmade lakes, crocodiles lurk. I write to remember that parallel to tourist-Udaipur, with its haveli hotels and lake palaces, there is another Udaipur, a city in which young girls commit suicide to escape unwanted marriages. I write to remember my luck.

And so I huddle over a notebook in a cramped, stuffy library nook, and I feel the dense, chance thrill of the moment. Searching for the right words to fabricate or resurrect real life forces me to look for the details, the synchronies, and the overheard snatches of confession or complaint that make up stories.

That is why I write.