

On Becoming an American Writer

By [Alexander Chee](#)

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My generation of writers—and yours, if you are reading this—lives in the shadow of Auden’s famous attack on the relevance of writing to life, when he wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen.” I had heard the remark repeated so often and for so long I finally went looking for its source, to try to understand what it was he really meant by it. Because I knew it was time for me to really argue with it. If not for myself, for my students.

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In the winter before the Iraq War, I lost two friends, one old, one new.

The first friend died of cancer in December 2002. She was just thirty-six. She had been misdiagnosed by her doctor. First, she was told she had a rash and then that she was imagining the severity of it. She was told to take antidepressants. After further tests, she learned she had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. A lifelong hypochondriac who always looked to be in the bloom of health, she had finally fallen seriously ill and was not believed. And when she eventually was believed, when the truth of her disease was incontrovertible, there was not time enough to undo the damage, and she succumbed. She had once been my boss at a magazine launched in the early nineties. I had met her in San Francisco, when she was the girlfriend of my boyfriend’s roommate. When I moved to New York to be closer to my boyfriend, she and I sometimes spent whole days together. She herself dreamed of writing a novel one day and in the meantime wrote poems more or less in secret, showing them rarely. When I was an editor of an experimental literary journal called *XXX Fruit*, we asked her for poems and published some of them. I remember looking at the typeset page and thinking of it as a picture of her secret self.

By then, she had moved on to a job at a national weekly newsmagazine, which she loved, though the responsibilities often crushed what energy she might have had to write. Or at least this was what she said. Most writers I know say they don't have enough time to write. It's usually a feint.

Her lover, a poet and novelist, spoke at the memorial service of how, during the eight months she was hospitalized, my friend would tell her stories in the dark, lights out, late into the night, about their life. The stories about them were set in the future but told in the present tense. In that imagined life, it went without saying, she had been healed of her cancer, and they had pets, a house in Woodstock, friends coming over for weekends. She had thought through every detail, down to the burial of their cats at the property's edge.

“What would you read to someone who was dying?” Annie Dillard had asked our class. She wanted this to be the standard for our work. There, at the memorial service for my friend, I thought of another: Dying, what stories would you tell?

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The second friend I lost that year was a new friend, who died suddenly at the end of February 2003. Tom was his name. He was slightly older than me at forty and healthy for a man as devoted as he was to good drink and good food, gay and HIV positive. He managed a café on Seventh Avenue in Brooklyn, and for the two and a half years I knew him, I saw him almost exclusively after sunset, him making coffee, me ordering it. He had met me in the season when my first novel had appeared. He had read it and would praise it loudly to anyone standing next to me in line. Soon, most of his regulars knew that I had published a novel, so I spent most of our friendship blushing. When he died, I was returning from a short second tour for the paperback.

In our last full conversation, he told me about the novel he'd plotted and begun writing. When I arrived back from my book tour and returned to the café, expecting to see him, I found a young South African man with a mohawk pouring coffee in his place. I began to

quietly panic. I knew Tom was HIV positive and would be absent only if something was very wrong.

Indeed, the South African told me that Tom was in the hospital. I decided I would wait two days for the cough I had to go away, not wanting to risk infecting him. He died on the day in between.

So many of my friends had been living with AIDS, I'd forgotten it could still kill them.

Tom died on a Thursday night. A wake was planned for Sunday. I was asked to read something. I spent the next few days in a cloud of apologetic prayer that eventually pointed me to the idea of writing an elegy. I found myself in the odd position of doing what I often did, which is making a poem for a friend, but in this case one he would never read. All the other times I'd written poems, for a birthday or a wedding, I'd written them with the idea that the poem would be heard by the person it was written for.

I was able to write it only when I imagined him reading it. When I imagined giving it to him. I gave it instead to the owner of the café and his coworkers. They set it in the window, next to a picture of Tom in his sun hat in Spain, where it stayed for a year.

The writing of elegies is something uncanny, and I use that word with the sense that I've never used it before. You can't help but imagine the poem being observed by the deceased. You are even addressing it to them, asking the dead in, not to speak but to listen. And you let nothing go from your desk that wouldn't meet their standard.

In the days that followed, whenever I got my coffee, I saw the picture of Tom next to my poem, and I thought each time about how you could wait too long to write. I was faltering with my second novel, but this stiffened my resolve. Tom had always had a knack for telling me the one thing I needed to hear, and in this way, he told me this last part, again and again, almost daily, until the poem came down.

There's another Alexander Chee in my mind, the one who I would be if I'd only had access to regular dental care throughout my career, down to the number of teeth in my mouth. I started inventing him on a visit to Canada in 2005 when I became unnerved by how healthy everyone looked there compared to the United States, and my sense of him grows every time I leave the country. I know I'll have a shorter career for being American in this current age, and a shorter life also. And that is by my country's design. It is the intention.

I have been to convenience stores where I see people working with untreated injuries, and when I leave, I get panhandled in the parking lot by someone in a chain-store uniform who is unable to afford the gas to get home on the last day before payday—someone with two jobs, three jobs. Until recently, I struggled to get by, and yet I am in the top twenty percent of earners in my country. I am currently saving up for dental implants—money I could as easily use for a down payment on a house. But I'm not entirely sure I'll see the end of a mortgage or that any of us will.

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Only in America do we ask our writers to believe they don't matter as a condition of writing. It is time to end this. Much of my time as a student was spent doubting the importance of my work, doubting the power it had to reach anyone or to do anything of significance. I was already tired of hearing about how the pen was mightier than the sword by the time I was studying writing. Swords, it seemed to me, won all the time. By the time I found that Auden quote—"poetry makes nothing happen"—I was more than ready to believe what I thought he was saying. But books were still to me as they had been when I found them: the only magic.

To write is to sell a ticket to escape, not from the truth but into it. My job is to make something happen in a space barely larger than the span of your hand, behind your eyes, distilled out of all that I have carried, from friends, teachers, people met on planes, people I have seen only in my mind, all my mother and father ever did, every favorite book,

until it meets and distills from you, the reader, something out of the everything it finds in you. All of this meets along the edge of a sentence like this one, as if the sentence is a fence, with you on one side and me on the other.

If you don't know what I mean, what I mean is this: When I speak of walking through a snowstorm, you remember a night from your childhood full of snow or from last winter, say, driving home at night, surprised by a storm. When I speak of my dead friends and poetry, you may remember your own dead friends, or if none of your friends are dead, you may imagine how it might feel to have them die. You may think of your poems or poems you've seen or heard. You may remember you don't like poetry.

Something new is made from my memories and yours as you read this. It is not my memory, not yours, and it is born and walks the bridges and roads of your mind, as long as it can.

All my life I've been told this isn't important, that it doesn't matter, that it could never matter. And yet I think it does.

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I began this essay as an email I wrote to my students during that first weekend of the Iraq War. I had felt a sudden, intense protectiveness of them. I didn't want my students to go into the draft, rumored then to be a possibility. I wrote to them that weekend and told them that art endures past governments, countries, and emperors, and their would-be replacements. That art—even, or perhaps especially, art that is dedicated somehow to tenderness—is not weak. It is strength. I asked them to disregard the cultural war against the arts that has lasted most of their lives, the movement to discredit the arts and culture in American public life as being decorative interruptions of more serious affairs, unworthy of funding or even of teachers. I told them that I can't recall the emperors of China as well as I can Mencius, who counseled them, and whose stories of them, shared in his poetry of these rulers and their problems, describe them for me almost entirely.

And the paradox of how a novel, should it survive, protects what a missile can't.

I have new lessons in not stopping, after the election. If you are reading this, and you're a writer, and you, like me, are gripped with despair, when you think you might stop: Speak to your dead. Write for your dead. Tell them a story. What are you doing with this life? Let them hold you accountable. Let them make you bolder or more modest or louder or more loving, whatever it is, but ask them in, listen, and then write. And when war comes—and make no mistake, it is already here—be sure you write for the living too. The ones you love and the ones who are coming for your life. What will you give them when they get there?

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