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## Assault on Art Precinct 13

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Last week I was supposed to be on holiday. I could have done some painting – house-painting, not art-painting – and I could have made some shelves for the garden shed. I did mow the lawn. But for most of the week, I camped on the couch. That would have been a holiday if I had not had a computer on my lap and if I had not been writing an article for a journal with a Friday deadline. The deadline would not have been so deadly if I had received the original email accepting my submission to the journal but requesting revisions. But Microsoft Outlook sent the email to the “junk” folder and it was several weeks before I discovered it. The article is about two groups of artists in New Zealand in the 1970s. One group reacted against the values of the other. But both groups were making subversive art relative to the dominant tendencies in the art-world of the time. Actually, the differences between the two groups masked the fact that they had things in common. The argument of the essay is complex and I struggled to string it together. Progress was slow. I would spend many hours working on a single paragraph. Writing is difficult. It can be a painful, even tortuous activity. Last week, it was made even more difficult by the conditions under which I was working. Certainly working at home was comfortable in some ways. It is important to have a space that is familiar. You know where things are, for example. However, throughout the week, there were frequent interruptions and intrusions; it was rare to be able to focus on the writing continuously for any length of time, and of course stopping and starting creates problems such as trying to remember what you were thinking at the end of the last stint. Spending time with the baby is nice, but nappies get filled remarkably quickly, and even the melodically rich and lyrically sophisticated nappy song, which goes “I’m going to change your nappy; I’m going to change your nappy right now; I’m going to change your nappy; because you’ve done a big poo in it,” begins to pall a bit after several renditions in quick succession. Washable nappies, while ethically admirable, are also time-consuming. And our water bill has risen considerably. It was so high, in fact, that I became suspicious, and it turned out we had a leaking pipe. So I had to find a plumber who had leak detection equipment, which took a bit of searching on the internet and phone-calling and ultimately small-talk with the plumber and so forth. The plumber’s bill, of course, was exorbitant but perhaps just shy of criminal. Sometimes when I was writing, the cat would sit on me. He is a large cat and tended to overlap the laptop keyboard so that typing became a deft operation and I started to develop aching wrists and forearms. We have a rule in our house that if you have the cat on you, you become a martyr; you should not stand up or otherwise disturb him. A cat on the lap is sacrosanct; his comfort is paramount. Another severe inconvenience I experienced was the convention of eating three meals a day. This is something that takes time, especially if you have to prepare the meal and there are others who will be sharing it. I have found that a couple of pieces of toast and an instant coffee are not everyone’s cup of tea. I thought about not eating meals and starving myself for the sake of my writing, but decided this was probably not wise. Having said that, I have found that being hungry can be good for creativity. A full stomach makes for a sluggish mind. In fact, doing something like writing under any kind of duress, or with a deadline looming, tends to be conducive to producing something good in a relatively short time. When I had the house to myself for several hours – utter peace and quiet – I did not find myself making more progress, and it was during one of these periods of perfect seclusion that I became mildly desperate and insane because I could not decide what the next sentence should be. It was as if to write the “wrong” thing would be catastrophic. Yes, you can always delete and edit and cut and paste and whatnot; it is not as if it is set in stone. But once I wrote the sentence, and decided to keep it, even if temporarily, it would be there on the page, influencing everything that came after it. I had to know if it was good or bad before I could do anything more. Hours would go by. And I had to be certain in my own mind about how it would be read. There are consequences to writing something that is just marginally awry. There are consequences in terms of your own ability to live with what you have written – to have it represent you or stand as the best you can do, or preferably exceeding what you thought you could do or anyone else could do. A sentence, even a word, is a matter of life and death.

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