

A Space of One's Own
by Amanda Gardner

Virginia Woolf's "Room of One's Own" is a famously feminist room, one with a lock on the door and one which, when combined with an adequate stipend, could afford women the means and privacy to write. Only then would women's lives cease to be "infinitely obscure lives [which] remain to be recorded" (p. 89). Almost a century later, those lives are being recorded and we have a growing canon of women's literature. We also have emerging Latina and Latino literature, LGBT literature, African-American literature, prison literature and more. But what of the stories still untold? The stories of those individuals who do not have a room, literally or figuratively? And, specifically, what of individuals who have experienced modern-day homelessness in the United States? The late 1970s and 1980s in the U.S. saw a remarkable increase in the number of homeless people, a tide attributed to several factors including the deinstitutionalization of people from psychiatric institutions. Are their narratives written down and are they recorded by the individuals themselves? Does Woolf's rubric of a "room of one's own" apply equally to people who are homeless and have no literal space? I suspected that the lack of space and the chaotic, fragmented nature of homelessness militated against producing a lengthy, cohesive narrative of the experience.

After facilitating a creative writing workshop at a homeless shelter in northern New Jersey for several years, I embarked on a quest similar to Virginia's Woolf search detailed in *A Room of One's Own*. Instead of looking for women writers, though, I looked for homeless writers. I was guided by two questions: Were there any homeless writers and was there anything resembling a genre of "homeless literature"? And, if not, why not?

I was given insight into homeless life from writing by people in the workshop but the writing provided only glimpses. "I move because not to move is to loiter and that is a misdemeanor," wrote Patryck Greene, a self-professed hippie who stayed at the shelter in the late 1990s. Greene was wryly referencing statutes which prevent homeless people from, essentially, occupying space or at least occupying space for any length of time¹. But I wanted to know if there were any fuller accounts, perhaps a full-length book, a notion of a beginning, middle and end and, how nice if the end happened to be an exit from homelessness. I found little in either the scholarly or mainstream literature, except references to workshops like the one I was involved in, occasionally resulting in an anthology, also I found no specific reference to "homeless literature"².

Paula Mathieu, a professor in Boston College's English Department has taught courses on homeless literature. Only one volume on the reading list - Lee Stringer's *Grand Central Winter* - had been authored by someone who had personally experienced homelessness. Two - *Shadow Women: Homeless Women's Survival Stories* by Marjorie Bard and *Shelter Blues: Sanity and Selfhood Among the Homeless* by Robert Desjarlais - were written by academics. The final two were Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and John Grisham's *The Street Lawyer*. Neither of these authors ever experienced homelessness as far as I knew. There have been a number of ethnographic treatments of homelessness in the tradition of Nels Anderson's 1923 classic, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*. More recent examples include David Snow and Leon Anderson's *Down on Their Luck* as well

¹ See Rudin, David, "'You Can't Be Here': The Homeless and The Right to Remain in Public Space." *N.Y.U. Review of Law & Social Change*, 2018, Vol. 42:309, p. 309-350) https://socialchangenyu.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Rudin_PublisherProof_3.28.18-.pdf.)

² After finishing this "quest," I found a brief article in *The Guardian*: "Does literature of the homeless exist?" (February 9, 2010, by Ben Myers, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/feb/09/homeless-literature>).

as David Wagner's *Checkerboard Square: Culture and Resistance in a Homeless Community*. Nick Flynn's memoir, *Another Bullshit Night In Suck City*, recounts his unexpected reunion with his father who was staying in a homeless shelter. I was able to find two "mainstream" books (published by big-name publishing houses and widely reviewed by the mainstream media) by homeless writers which described their homeless experience. One was Lee Stringer's *Grand Central Winter: Stories from the Street* (Seven Stories Press, 1998), his account of living in the tunnels underneath Grand Central Station for several years. The other was Lars Eighner's *Travels With Lizbeth: Three Years on the Road and on the Streets* (Fawcett Columbine, 1993).

Numerous homeless newspapers proliferated in the final decades of the 20th century but not all of them used homeless writers. When I called one Boston street newspaper in search of homeless writers, I was told that no homeless people actually wrote for the paper.

An exception (to be fair, probably one of many) was New York City's *Street News*, "World's Oldest Active Motivational Homeless Newspaper." Thus, the first stop on my quest to find homeless writers was the "editor 'n chief" of *Street News*, Indio. I had written a story on Indio and *Street News* when I was a reporter at the *New York Daily News* and he had come out to the shelter to lead a workshop. I called Indio at his home in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens, also now the *Street News* office, and asked him what he thought a "homeless writer" was. "It means that the homeless person is the writer," he replied, making a distinction between this and "people who write on the homeless and they have no experiences." Asked to elaborate, he provided this description: "To me, a homeless writer is one who writes about the homeless. The next thing is I would consider him homeless or formerly homeless."

Indio had been editor of *Street News* for years (taking over from Lee Stringer) and he kept careful track of the *Street News* contributors, his "crew," no small feat when you consider many of the contributors were still homeless. It was significant that I could in fact reach Indio. He told me that before he became homeless himself, people came to him asking for assistance. After he became homeless, "there was nowhere to contact me because I was in the streets." Although he had been off the streets for many years, Indio knew the challenges his crew faced firsthand. I asked him if it was difficult to write while one was homeless. "Of course," he said in a tone which implied I should have known this rather than suspected it. In order to write, many of his crew had to use computers in public libraries, he told me, but you could only use them in short time allotments and "a lot of people type with one finger . . . so you type what you can in that half an hour and then you wait and you sign up again for another half an hour." Indio also said there were computers at Wendy's on 42nd Street in Manhattan but that you had to pay for those, something that was beyond the means of most contributors. When *Street News* still had an office - on the West Side of Manhattan - writers could work there. Says Indio, "What we had going for us at *Street News* was it was a place to buy papers, also a place to sit down and drink coffee and eat and talk and write." It was, in effect, a room, a place. But *Street News* now lacked an official residence, the office it did have was relegated to Kew Gardens, Queens, on the margins of New York City and it would later move even further away from the center, to Staten Island. Other obstacles abounded, as Indio explained, "Ninety-nine and three-quarters what you have is on your back. . . Whatever you have for survival you hide it and hope nobody finds it. If they do find it, they're going to steal it." Indio added that when he became homeless himself he "lost all of my writing." That was in addition to "my animals, my pets, three cats and two dogs, clothes, furniture, belongings." (By the time I met Indio, he had just one dog, "Ruff.")

According to Woolf, Jane Austen also cloaked her writing. Working always in a common sitting-room, "Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting paper. . . . [She] was glad that a hinge creaked so that she might hide her manuscript before any one came

in" (1981, p. 67). But Austen's motivation, Woolf wrote, was shame, not fear of theft. I asked Indio if he could name some homeless writers who managed to write despite the challenges? "Ace Backwards," he replied without missing a beat. Backwards had authored *Surviving on the Streets: How to Go Down Without Going Out*, which was published in 2001 by Loompanics Inc. in Port Townsend, Washington. "He was homeless," Indio said. "He is also a cartoonist . . . then he writes about his experiences, he talks about . . . things you will have to deal with: The streets are dangerous, drugs and alcohol, overexposure to the elements. He goes into it and, to really understand it, you have to be homeless or was homeless."

And there was Henry³, who I had already met. He was one of Indio's writers and had also come out to the shelter to make a presentation about street newspapers. He wrote for several of them nationally - it had become his vocation - and one of his *Street News* articles had been reprinted in *Harper's Magazine*. "What about Lee Stringer?" I asked Indio. "Lee Stringer was a homeless writer the first book, the second [*Like Shaking Hands with God: A Conversation about Writing, 1999*] he hooked up with Kurt Vonnegut and that was not dealing with homeless," Indio responded. "His third book [*Sleepaway School: Stories from a Boy's Life: A Memoir, 2004*] ... is not dealing with homeless . . . [He's a] formerly homeless writer. He's now deviating."

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Lee Stringer was, for some years, one of the "Mole People," described by Jennifer Toth in her book of the same name, *The Mole People: Life in the tunnels beneath New York City* (Chicago Review Press, 1995). In fact, I knew from reading *Grand Central Winter* that Stringer dated his emergence as a writer to this period in his life. The beginning of *Grand Central Winter* has Stringer "digging around in [his] hole" underneath the train station, "trying to find some small, dowel-like instrument with which to push the screens from one end of my stem to the other so I could smoke the remaining resin caking up the thing" (p. 13)⁴.

Stringer eventually finds a pencil which "does the trick" (1998, p. 14). He starts carrying the pencil around with him so he won't be caught short the next time he has drugs on him, except one day he finds he has the pencil but no drugs. Then, he writes, "it dawns on me that this is a pencil ... and you can write with the thing" (p. 15). Stringer starts digging around again, looking for a composition book he knows is in his "cubbyhole" under the station. He finds it and starts writing and can't stop. ("The things a person will do when he's not smoking," Stringer writes on page 15.) Stringer keeps scribbling until he has a whole story which "looks pretty good. Even great in parts" (p. 16). He takes the story to *Street News*. They publish it and soon Stringer has a regular column. That first story was called "No Place to Call Home." Even if he was no longer a homeless writer in the sense that he lacked an abode, he still wrote (albeit not so much about homelessness), Stringer seemed like a good place to go next. Indio gave me his phone number and I called him in Mamaroneck, New York, where he now lived. He was happy to chat.

Stringer became a *Street News* writer and vendor and, eventually, editor while the paper still had its Manhattan office. He not only worked at *Street News* but lived there and started writing *Grand Central Winter* there, mostly at night, he told me. He also told me that he didn't finish the book until more than a year after he got off the street, after graduating from rehab and moved in with his mother. One could say *after* he had found a room. At that point, he recalled, "I pulled out the manuscript and I said, 'I can't stand this self-righteous son of a bitch' and I started all over

³ Not his real name

⁴ Stringer is referring to his crack cocaine habit.

again. That's when the real writing began. It wasn't about grinding an agenda." This "self-righteous" agenda is emblematic of another impediment to women's writing identified by Woolf. In order to create, Woolf says, the creator must banish "all desire to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievances (p. 56-57)." His or her mind must become "incandescent" (p. 56).

In our conversation, Stringer brought up a "homeless book" which he felt had fallen into this self-righteous trap: *My Life on the Street: Memoirs Of A Faceless Man*, by "Joe Homeless" (New Horizon Press, Far Hills, New Jersey, 1992). Stringer said he "didn't like [the book] so much because . . . everywhere he went there were mobs of people wanting to destroy him because he was homeless and I was out there 12 years and that, you know, there was a backlash against the homeless but as direct and obvious as he had it in the book just didn't make sense. It was total, 'I'm a victim' thing. Every page he was a victim and, as a book, it didn't bring anything new to the table."⁵ I asked him if he thought there was a genre of "homeless literature" and, if not, why not. He responded that he "stalwartly resisted" the label of homeless literature," instead putting it within a larger category of literature from the margins and that writing, he pointed out, does play an important role. The mainstream, he said, "cannot exist without the opposite poles . . . Some of us have to wander near the edge just to warn the rest of us." And *Grand Central Winter* is just one account of homelessness, he added. Lars Eighner's is entirely different. "It was a road story," Stringer said. "His subject was the America behind the road signs, behind the commercials . . . It wasn't a study of homelessness." And to the extent that it was a story of homelessness, "it wasn't as dark as mine was," he said.

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A quick internet search revealed that Lars Eighner had an online presence in the form of his own website which included his email. I sent him a note, heard back almost immediately and scheduled a time to talk on the phone. At the time, he was living with a roommate in Austin, Texas.

If Lee Stringer was a homeless man who became a writer, Lars Eighner was a writer who became homeless. Before *Travels with Lizbeth*, he had published several short stories in gay men's magazines and a collection of short stories which, he said, was critically received. Unlike Stringer, who could date his homelessness to a precise date and time - "an early weekday morning" in the summer of 1985 while he slept in his East 96th Street studio apartment - when the sheriff arrived to evict him - Eighner didn't so much fall into homelessness as slip quietly and gradually into it. When I asked him about the circumstances of his becoming homeless, he said, "When it started, I didn't think I was becoming homeless. I thought I was hitchhiking to California where I knew I could sleep on someone's sofa for one or two weeks and felt sure I would get one of two or three jobs I thought I had lined up out here." One of those jobs was as an assistant editor at a gay men's magazine in Southern California.

When he left Austin at the outset of *Travels with Lizbeth*, Eighner was "living under a shower curtain in a stand of bamboo in a public park" (p. ix). Soon he and dog Lizbeth were on the road, hitching rides when they could and spending nights by the side of the road or indoors if such an opportunity arose. In Los Angeles, Eighner slept on a friend's couch as planned then retreated to a national forest to work on a voice-over script for an adult film. He never stopped writing the whole journey, telling me that he "always had paper and I was always writing." Writing on the road, though, meant "stuff just got lost too easily and so if I didn't mail it to somebody, mail it as a

⁵ I did try to find "Joe Homeless," but discovered that he had passed away.

letter or as part of the manuscript, it was lost," he explained. "Material that covered the first two-thirds of the time period or thereabouts, I managed to accumulate by mailing to a friend who had agreed to keep it for me, but even long before that I was writing very long letters to various friends," he said.⁶

Like Stringer, Eighner finished his manuscript when he was back in Austin and housed, albeit precariously. The letters and notes from his travels were "reflected [in the final manuscript] as sort of fact-checking, to help remember if something happened when I thought it happened." When I asked Eighner if he thought there was a "homeless literature," he responded, "I haven't thoroughly researched it myself but my understanding is that most of this stuff that is called homeless writing is by people who didn't really have to be in those circumstances, had some alternative to sleeping in the rough or had a really loose understanding of what homeless is. I hear people who are in a shelter call themselves homeless. If you're not sleeping in the rough you're not homeless. You're housed if you are in a shelter, if you are in a program, temporary hotel . . . I counted homelessness as when I was in the abandoned building, without lights or running water."

Travels with Lizbeth ends on an ambiguous note. The reader has the impression that Eighner will continue writing but is also told that another bout with homelessness could occur at any moment. "I feel as if I am a struggling swimmer who has got his head above water but who remains far from shore," he wrote (271). "Any little difficulty with my health - or that of the machine [a personal computer he found in a Dumpster] - could put us on the street again" (p. 271).

By this time, I had learned from Indio that *Street News* contributor Henry was back in town after one of his frequent trips to explore and write about homelessness. I emailed him at the address Indio gave me and we met at a restaurant in Hoboken, about a block from the homeless shelter where I ran the workshop. Henry was the first (and only) homeless writer I met who actually called himself a homeless writer. He told me that he became homeless when he was asked to be laid off from his job as a parts manager for a construction firm in Flushing, Queens. At the time, he said, "The extent of my writing went as far as letter writing . . . helping somebody with their papers" but that "I've always been involved in or interested in writing and literature and stories." When first homeless, he stayed at flop houses on the Bowery and started "taking notes in a . . . pocket notebook, but I wasn't really writing anything for anybody, just for me to organize my thoughts and my ideas and my impressions."

A chance remark by someone he met at the downtown benefits office about homeless people in other cities spurred him to start writing in earnest. "When I started traveling was when I knew I was writing, when I knew I was going to be a writer because everything that hit me was writable, if you will," he told me. "I started writing about what I experienced in these places and I sent the stories to Indio snail mail," he said. (He had met Indio in New York City previously, before that time "didn't really think of myself as a homeless writer.")

Henry started traveling more and more often - by bus or train or hitchhiking - and started filing stories not only to *Street News* but to newspapers in other cities as well. After we talked at the

⁶ That said, Eighner told me, sometimes stamps were an issue, early in the journey, he had all his belongings stolen - clothing, bedding, dog food and a "little radio . . . of no appreciable value" and some papers. He was left with a book of stamps with a face value of \$4.40. He walked about seven miles to a bookstore a friend in Austin had mentioned and traded them for cash (p. 19). A day or two later, he found a \$10 bill in the desert.

restaurant, he came to the shelter workshop carrying a stack of street newspapers containing his various stories. Many of these stories, though, he never saw. "I'd send the work to a newspaper say in Portland or Seattle or - and I'd be gone in three or four weeks before the publication came out," he told me. As he traveled, he also read the "great American writers" - Jack Kerouac, Jack London, Nelson Algren, Paul Auster, Ezra Pound, Jack Black, O. Henry. "It was every single writer that you . . . can think of that walked the streets, that hitchhiked, that rode the freight trains. Those were my idols if you will, my mentors, those were the guys that really pushed me, that encouraged me, besides Indio," said Henry. This was the closest allusion I had encountered during my various interviews to a literary tradition, similar to the one Woolf mentioned as a necessary condition for women writers. Granted, all of the authors Henry mentioned predated "new homelessness" and most were voluntarily transient.

Henry described homelessness as an ascetic pinnacle, saying that "a homeless writer is in the catbird seat because he has stripped himself of everything, of money, of home, of many times, religion, of his family and the only thing he has is himself and for me that is the proper starting point for a writer." Similarly, Orwell wrote of the "feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out" (2001:79; Hall p. 73). When I asked him how he managed the logistics of writing while homeless, he said at first it was a non-issue because "I didn't really consider myself as a writer. . . It was just . . . something to do with my time." He described his process: ". . . to always have a notebook to write the story out in longhand, to edit it in longhand and then to try to find a computer," which, he added, was "one of the most difficult tasks." In the event he did find a computer, he always carried a floppy disk with him as most libraries "don't allow you to save to the C drive."

Eventually, finding a computer became imperative if he was going to publish. He found them mostly in public libraries, where they only offered one hour at a time, sometimes two, per day. Some organizations offered free computers but, he said, "they were often miles away from the homeless shelter and rescue missions and it was one of the most frustrating experiences for me and I couldn't afford to buy a computer." I lost touch with him for a while then, early in 2004, I learned from Indio that he again was sojourning in Queens to write a book. I emailed him about another interview. When we met this time, I asked him if he considered himself homeless now. "I'm living with a friend. I'm working on a book now and as soon as I'm done with it. I expect to hit the streets,⁷" he told me.

For my last interview of the set, I circled back to the first homeless writer Indio had mentioned: Ace Backwords, author of *Surviving on the Streets*. Backwords is well-known as an underground cartoonist. Loompanics (publisher of *Surviving on the Streets*) had also put out a volume of his cartoon strips, *Twisted Image*, as well as a novella about his teenage homeless years, *Journey Through the Tenderloin*. Backword's illustrations have appeared in several other books. Reading *Surviving on the Streets* revealed that Backwords had been on-and-off homeless since 1978, when he was 19 years old. He had lived most if not all of this time in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, either on the street, in a rented room or camping in the Berkeley Hills. I had no idea where Backwords was now, although Indio had given me a number and email for Loompanics in Port Townsend. I called to

⁷ I was unable to determine if Henry found a publisher for his book. I could not find a record of any book or any further articles online, at least under his real name. In 2018, Indio said he had not heard from him or of him in years.

find that the number had been disconnected, not surprisingly, given that Loompanics had closed up shop in 2006.

I searched "Ace Backwards" on the internet and found some grim news accounts about his health as well as several tributes, leading me to believe Backwards had passed away. He had not. I eventually found his online presence at his Wordpress blog, *Acid Heroes* (a reference to his second, self-published book, on the 1960s "legends of LSD" such as Timothy Leary and Hunter S. Thompson.) The latest post was from the night before. I couldn't find an email on his site so I left a comment to one of his posts: "Hi Ace, I used to write for *Street News* and am doing research on 'homeless writers.' Loved your *Surviving on the Streets*. Any chance you could talk sometime?" I had an email response almost right away, subject "Your research project."

He wrote that he'd been living in "the middle of the Arizona desert for the last couple of months" and the best way to communicate was via email. He ended the message with a photo of himself with Keef, one of his feral cats, at his campsite in the Berkeley Hills. He said that questions were best delivered via email then signed off, "Ace in space." I sent him a set of questions. He got back to me in a few days. He told me in the email that he had been writing all his life and had been keeping "extensive daily journals since 1993." He continued: "Much of the raw material for *Surviving on the Streets* came directly from those hand-written entries." And mostly from a three-year period starting in 1995 during which he was homeless in Humboldt County (north of San Francisco) and Berkeley. At that time, he related, he reached out to Loompanics with his "idea to do a 'How To' book about street living. And they jumped at the chance to publish it."

In 1998, he wrote, "I lucked out and got off the street by renting out a little office in Berkeley for \$120 a month. It was barely more than a walk-in closet, a 6-foot by 12-foot space. But it was perfect for my needs. I secretly lived there, and worked there for nine years. (According to *Surviving on the Streets*, the money for rent came partly from profits from the TELEGRAPH AVENUE STREET CALENDAR featuring Berkeley street personalities he and others published every year.)

Despite on-and-off homelessness, he somehow managed to hold onto all his notes, despite other possessions being stolen (two chapters in *Surviving on the Streets* are devoted to the subject of storing and keeping "your stuff" on the streets). Via email, he told me he had "bought a cheap, used '94 Mac and organized and typed up the manuscript on that. Sent the pages to Loompanics a chapter at a time for a period of about a year. And they published it virtually word-for-word with almost no editing (they [sic] only thing they took out was a couple of nasty sentences I wrote about Ted Kennedy, which I assume they deleted for legal reasons)."

In 2007, the Berkeley building he had been living in changed owners. He was booted out and would be homeless (as defined by Lars Eighner) for the next six years. By that time, *Surviving on the Streets*, which ultimately sold 5,000 copies, had been out for six years. I had asked him in my original email if he had ever heard the terms, "homeless writer" or "homeless writers." "I've never really thought of it as a genre," he replied. "But there are many writers, including myself, they could be considered 'street writers'⁸. Authors like Kerouac, Burroughs, Bukowski, etc." Did he consider himself a homeless writer? "I don't consider myself a 'homeless writer' per se. I've written all my live [sic] and write about whatever milieu I happen to be in, homelessness certainly being one of them. But I've also been involved in many other subcultures - this San Francisco bike messenger scene, the Punk Rock scene, the pornography underworld, the Berkeley counterculture, the underground cartoonists movement - to name a few. And I've written extensively about my involvement in all these realms, as well as the homeless realm."

⁸ "Street Literature" can refer to literature set in urban areas and relating to a lower level of the socio-economic strata.

This seemed similar to Lee Stringer's remarks about a larger marginal realm of literature. "That said," he continued. "I consider my homeless writing to have a space place in the literary world. For one thing, most of the writing about the homeless is written by journalists and professional authors. People looking at homelessness from the outside looking in. And most of it gives a very limited, and often misinformed, picture of the homeless world, in my opinion. It's rare to get writing that comes completely undiluted from the homeless perspective. Which I think is one of the things that makes my *Street* book special. The typical homeless person lives such a chaotic and disorganized life, its [sic] rare when they get the opportunity to give their side of the story. And a good percentage of them are too spaced-out or untrained to write about that world even if they had the opportunity. Whereas I came to the project with a long background in journalism and publishing, and the eye of an artist, if I say so myself." He ended that email with, "I'm working on a public computer in the library and its [sic] about to shut off so I'll have to cut this short. Will finish later." He came back later with a description of how he wrote *Acid Heroes*. The book was penned not in an office or any kind of room but in Backwards' sleeping bag in "a beautiful spot up in the Berkeley hills," which was "my home, in every sense of the word, for several years" (p. 30)

While *Surviving on the Streets* took him two years to finish, *Acid Heroes* took him "at least 7 years and about 10 drafts," he told me via email. "I wrote, edited and self-published the final draft while I was homeless and living out of a sleeping bag. Trying [sic] publishing 300 page book during the rainy season from a sleeping bag! I wouldn't recommend it. That book just about KILLED me." Also during that period he was diagnosed with glaucoma and attending to his best friend of 30 years, who was on his deathbed. Unfortunately, he wasn't happy with the result. "Unfortunately, I consider *Acid Heroes* a great idea that was poorly written and poorly organized. . . I originally envisioned it as the sequel to the *Street* book. If *Surviving on the Streets* was about surviving the battles in the physical world, *Acid Heroes* was about surviving the battles in my own mind. Not sure if I won that one. Ha ha."

Conclusions

I originally set out to determine if there were any homeless writers and, by extension, if there was anything resembling a genre of "homeless literature" akin to that of "prison literature." And this necessarily segues into a mention of the limitations of this inquiry. I will mention just a few. Symmetries between Woolf's exposition on women writers and this exploration of homeless writers is imperfect at best. For one thing, "woman" and "women" is easier to define than "homeless" or "homelessness," precise definitions of which have long eluded the U.S. Census Bureau, legislators, leading academics, not to mention "homeless" people themselves. Is someone who is doubled up in a friend's or relatives house homeless? What about a child in foster care? Or people who say they are nomads by choice? How long does a person have to be without a certain type of abode in order to be classified as homeless? And what is "home" anyway? Physical lodging or a broader concept or feeling? The term "literature" is similarly vague. For this investigation, I confined myself to book-length narratives and was particularly interested in those that had achieved mainstream publication. Varying opinions on what does or does not constitute "literature" abound. Like homelessness, there is no one agreed definition.

Keeping in mind the above limitations and others, can I conclude from my research that there is a genre of "homeless literature" akin to "prison literature." My answer would have to be "No." Prison literature is commonly taken to mean works written while the author is imprisoned. Certainly homeless people write while homeless but the works cited here were completed during a period in which the authors could claim a physical abode of some kind. The three published

accounts of homelessness (Stringer, Eighner, Backwords) mentioned here were all completed when the writer could claim a literal room of his own. Henry's book (as far as I can determine, not yet published) was written when he was staying indoors with a friend. Backwords wrote his first book after renting a space in Berkeley. The second he wrote while sleeping "in the rough" but he was not happy with the result. "It was a great idea that was poorly written and poorly organized," he told me in one of his emails. Of course, we can't assume that writing the book "in the rough" contributed to Backwords' claims of inferiority. Henry was the only writer I interviewed who directly alluded to the idea of a room as a necessary precondition for writing. "It's very difficult to write when you're on the streets," he said in our second interview. "It behooves a writer to have a room, a cubicle when he can write or she can write." And Backwords echoed my original theory when he told me that "[T]he typical homeless person lives such a chaotic and disorganized life, it's rare when they get the opportunity to give their side of the story." On the surface, then, these examples seem to support Virginia Woolf's assertion that one (a woman or anyone else) needs a room of his or her own in order to write, or at least complete a manuscript.

But perhaps I am asking the wrong questions. Perhaps the circumstances of homelessness, as it has been variously defined in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, are too particular to relate to other "genres" of literature. What if I tossed aside the narrow definition of literature I employed and, instead, examined writing by homeless people, complete manuscripts or scribbled sentences? And instead of asking how homeless writing fits into society's structures, what if I asked why a person experiencing homelessness might write? And what if I was concerned not so much with "home" in the physical sense of the word but with "home" in the larger, philosophical sense? When I met Lee Stringer at the Mozart Restaurant in Mamaroneck, New York, his "hometown," I commented, perhaps cavalierly, that homeless people have little space. He quickly corrected me. "Oh they have inner space," he said as he swatted the bees swarming our sidewalk table. "We all make the space we need. . . I think that's quite a true thing. I know it was for me. . . The time on the street led me more to myself." That time, of course, was also what led Stringer to writing.

I once asked the writers at the homeless shelter writing workshop why they wrote. Richard Grimm, a brilliant, reclusive man who came regularly to the weekly workshop for about seven years and who has since passed away, wrote "I hope this doesn't sound too grandiose but we write, I suppose, to leave a record of ourselves, to say, 'Hey! Look! I was here one time and in this place.' Some others write for reasons of crass commercialism--the money. Some others think writing is somehow not working (in the dreary, sweaty sense of the word) and that it's better than punching a time clock. But ask any pro writer, writing is work. But, I like to think writing is its own reward that we feel better for having expressed ourselves."

Self-professed exile Andre Aciman writes in *Letters of Transit* that "the written word [is] a way of fashioning a new home elsewhere" (10) and that "[W]ords, despite their desire to appear so coolly collected and focused, are the priceless buoys with which [exiles] try to stay afloat both as professional thinker and human beings" (14).

Perhaps for Richard and other homeless writers, the written word bestows a figurative space when actual space is lacking, writing becomes a metaphorical home until an actual room of one's own materializes.

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