How long must a trace remain before it can count as an inscription? And what kinds of inscription count as writing? (Can one even “count” writing? Or is that to confuse the alphabetical with the mathematical?) When the fox leaves prints in the snow, might this be an unplanned narrative, its pace and meaning depending on the reader (a fellow mammal, most likely)? Can a dog sniff a good story — full of nuanced gossip — in the urine of an absent canine author — one who specializes in slim volumes of liquid free-verse on fire-hydrants? Alternatively, the lazy, rippling wake of a sampan in the Perfume river — might this be a fleeting story of something? A prosaic record of passage on the glittering surface of water? Photography claims to write in light, just as phonography tells tales in sound. These are modes of capture. And exposure.

Many claim that writing is an exclusively human gesture, achieved through machinic means, and with inhuman materials. Others, however, insist that the inky traces we leave in books, on walls, and scraps of paper are essentially no different from the slime which a snail leaves in sticky memory of its sluggish trail.
The old writer yawned, as his red-rimmed eyes tried to adjust to the bright early afternoon light. He sipped on a misshapen ceramic cup, filled with Japanese green tea, so strong that it tasted like tobacco mixed with algae, mashed and diluted into a thin paste. (A habit he acquired during a working visit in the East, many years ago.) Lately the old writer had been composing long poems about nature. And he had come to believe that the words on the page were at least partly excretions of the organic materials he absorbed in order to function in the first place. Writing came as natural to him as breathing; perhaps even more so. (Many times, he had been accused by friends or former lovers as being little more than a “word processor”: a man-machine who would rather hammer out some detailed account of an imagined experience than enjoy or suffer a real one.) But in each subsequent sip of his bitter tea, the old writer could also taste the chemicals which leached into the soil, and thus — eventually — into the soul. Nature was receding from him. And his prose felt less and less effective at trapping and tagging it.

The old writer peeked his rather hairy head out of the little wooden hut the authorities had provided, loosely modeled on Thoreau’s modest dwelling near Walden pond. There was no body of water nearby, however. Just a 30-foot perimeter, enclosing rather featureless shrubs and anonymous landscaping. A young Russian couple were standing on the other side of the railing, facing the other way, so did not see him. They were taking a photograph of themselves with a camera, perched on the end of a long silver-stick, designed for that purpose. Sticks, the old writer reflected, were a technology that would always find a purpose. Sticks for scratching. Sticks for stabbing. Sticks for hitting. Sticks for walking. Sticks for writing…. Sticks of incense, for worship. Sticks of dynamite, for warships. Sticks and stones may break the bones, but words can never hurt us. Only children could say such a thing; disproving their own point by repeating the mantra to waxy, offended ears. The pen is mightier than the sword. Equally untrue, when it comes down to it.

After eating some grains and fruit, and suffering the abrasive evacuations that followed, he put on his wide-brimmed hat
and ventured out into the sun. More tourists were now gathered against the railing, several feet above him, and made clicking noises with their mouths and cameras at his appearance. The old writer had long ago given up the habit of acknowledging the clients of the park, who came to see those last remaining people who work outside the Apparatus — those like himself, who (for instance) write as a mode of expression, rather than as a function. The old writer was, in fact, one of twelve different writers in the Park, and the father of two of them. The authorities had, once upon a time, used him, and his once-potent plume, in the hope of continuing the line of this endangered species. But those days were now long gone, as this honor went to younger, more virile wordsmiths. (Itself an interesting concept: a “wordsmith” — like a blacksmith, perhaps? — who forges elaborate communicational shapes on a sparking mental anvil, out of the malleable materials of molten language…. To forge: meaning both to create and to fake.)

The old writer shuffled down the short and narrow stone path to the gazebo, where his trusty typewriter rested (and rusted) on a bamboo table, upon which fresh paper was always waiting for him, compliments of the Park. He liked to refer to this beloved object as “the machine in the garden.” (Just as the old writer was well aware that he himself was an inhabitant of one of the few remaining gardens in the wider world machine.) Now that the authorities had passed on their budget cuts, in the form of tomato juice spiked with apple vinegar, rather than the half-decent red wine he used to enjoy, his work was, admittedly, more focused. The first few months, after this unwelcome change, were ugly. He refused to write, until an unblinking woman of indeterminate age and accent convinced him — by way of elaborate cajolings and expertly veiled threats — to start tapping away once more. The following weeks saw an angry torrent of words spew out of the typewriter, filled with violence and impotent rage. But no matter. No-one ever read what he wrote. And even if they did, these new people would have no idea what to make of such words, unfit for the so-called “living” documents of the new age.
(Documents only living in the same sense as the undead, according to the old writer.)

After a while, the tomato juice cocktail had its cleansing effect on his internal organs, which themselves re-organized themselves into an arrangement that no longer required self-tranquilization to create. He felt more exposed to the invisible elements of existence, and thus his writing became keener. Did it bother him that he had no readers, only spectators or witnesses? If so, it did not show in his creative process. Nor in his mood, which was mostly sanguine. Or at least, resigned. He was glad they let him write. After all, what else could, or would, he do?

And so he sat in front of the typewriter, which—though rusty—still clunked away faithfully, when pressed, like a beloved steam-train of childhood, that never left the station. He did not write immediately, however. First he settled into his wicker chair, with the old velvet cushion that had graciously adapted to his rather moist and bony buttocks. (The days were usually hot in the park, and even more so in the concrete bowls of the exhibits.) Indeed, he would sit for hours and hours, without hitting a single key. This was his process. He would clear his mind for an hour or so, while methodically and unthinkingly cracking each of his knuckles. He would then pick up a piece of paper, with a vain flourish, and wind it into the mechanism. (A gesture which would often yield a smattering of applause from the onlookers.) These same onlookers would then become impatient, as he would continue to stare and ponder—his fingers resting on the keys, like a concert pianist—without applying any pressure. On occasion, some rude and impatient guests would even throw things at him—pens, a lot of the time. Or peanuts. Thankfully this type of action would usually get a swift reaction from the guards, even if they often missed the teenagers spitting gum in his thinning hair.

Were the visitors more literate, they would possibly pay more attention to the signs informing them that the old writer was virtually nocturnal; not actually creating words until the dusk. For words tend to resist being written. They are themselves shy, and would prefer to float on the tip of tongues than arrested on
the page. They shun the light, and gain confidence in the dark. So the old writer must coax them forth. In that sense, writing is something akin to a religious ritual, in which the spirits must be encouraged to show themselves, and linger. Then again, if asked, the old writer would no doubt consider such an analogy to be a touch too grandiose. The process may indeed include some of the intermediary gifts (or tricks) of the “medium,” but also the simple focus of the child, determined to catch fireflies in a jar.

Which is why nights were best for writing, even as it annoyed the owners of the Park, since the visitors would never see the old writer actually involved in his vocation. And what’s more, his tapping would keep the other exhibits awake — the artists, the lovers, the buskers, the waiters, the philosophers, the anarchists, the priests, the astrologers, the illusionists, the burlesque dancers, the professors, the match-makers, the raconteurs. Tap-tap-tap. Ding. Swoosh. The machine in the garden would clack its own language beyond the sputtering candle’s reach, and into the darkness, like some kind of skeletal Victorian robot, seeking the last of its own species to court. After a while, the authorities trained a strong spotlight on the old writer’s desk, which encouraged an army of moths to swirl around him. For weeks, the stories would stutter themselves into being, accompanied by the flutter of wings in his hair, ears, and eye-lids, and sometimes the crunchy dust of vibrating bodies in his mouth. (Those nights he sometimes dreamed sweet dreams of exotic women, tempting him to nibble on surprisingly bitter halva.) But one night the bulb of the spotlight died, and no-one remembered to replace it. And the old writer was typing by candle-light once more.

Writing and typing. Typing and writing. Until the sky began to brighten again. And the stars would wink away, one-by-one, taking the words of the night with them. Until there were no more willing to appear. Just a string of translucent letters in the air, curling and dissolving like smoke; fluttering elsewhere. Like moths.

At which time, the old writer would finally let the machine cease its rickety racket. And cover it, as if for sleep. Then shuffle
back to his hut, just as the keepers of the Park were hosing down
the pavements, in preparation for the next round of visitors.