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A Novel Subsidy

By Daniel Akst

"We don't pay truckers not to truck, we don't pay miners not to mine and we shouldn't pay farmers not to farm."

-Rep. Dick Armey (R-Tex.), in The New York Times

The name on this article is a pseudonym, because for me, writing is against the law.

My troubles began with a lifelong dream. I was a newspaperman, but I always wanted to write great literature. Oh, I'd read about the nation's perennial writing crisis. I knew, in a general sort of way, about the terrible overproduction, the glorious fecundity of our scribes, their efficiency at raising simile, onomatopoeia, and so forth. Giant litera-businesses in the Midwest—the University of Iowa Writers' Program, e.g.—churned out crate after crate of flavorless but perfectly formed prose, suitable for shipping anywhere. America's publishers harvested 50,000 new titles a year, and the nation was a cornucopia of newsletters, magazines, and scholarly journals.

Yet our family seemed safe. We had our little house, and the kids were doing well in school. I quit my job and wrote a book. I started another. Then little Jeffy came along. With three kids and a glut of good writing on the market, I just couldn't make it any more.

I swallowed my pride and went on the dole.

I didn't consider it welfare at first. "The writers' subsidy," I called it. But I knew what it really was, and my wife--we'll call her Sandy--noticed right off.

"Honey, are you maybe just a little blocked lately? I haven't seen you go near the word processor for days." She tousled my hair. "Muse not coming to call?"

"Sandy, sit down. I've got something to tell you."

She could tell it was serious. Most of the time I never told her anything. I always saved it for my work.

"Sandy, I can't write for awhile."

"What? Why not?"

"I--I signed a paper, that's why. For five years. I've enrolled in the government price support program for writers. You know what that is?"

"You mean--they pay you not to write?"

"I had to do it, honey. Little Jeffy, well, he was just the last straw. We had to have more money, and there's already so much writing out there."

"But people in Eastern Europe are just dying for something to read." She began to cry. "Folks are starving. They need food for thought."

I tried to console her.

"I'm no economist, sweetheart, but from what I was told down at the Federal building, those countries just don't have the purchasing power."

"Why us? Joyce Carol Oates has been flooding the market for years. Why is it always the little people who suffer?"

Things haven't been the same for us since. The money's good, but my family's been writing for four generations. We've got metaphor in our blood. How do you think it felt knowing I could make more not writing than writing? Some days I thought I'd just bust if I didn't do a personal essay, a bit of technical writing, even a little haiku. Things got so bad Sandy wouldn't trust me around the kids.

It started with the best of intentions, but only now are the system's devastating consequences beginning to come to light. With roots going back to the New Deal, the payments-to-writers program exploded in the 1970s, when increasing over-capacity threatened the volatile literary markets. A collapse might have meant no new writing for years. So the government set up a program to soak up some of the excess production.

For awhile, Uncle Sam just bought manuscripts and stacked `em in a warehouse somewhere. Sometimes, when there was nothing to read in Africa, a few tons of short stories were shipped over, with lots of press hoopla. One time villanelles and memoirs were distributed to inner-city folks, and boom, just like that, lines around the block. But mostly, the great stockpile of pages just grew, and moldered.

Sooner or later someone figured out that buying up manuscripts just encouraged writers to write. That was the beginning of a series of notorious "market orders" under color of which the government destroyed millions of unpublished books, articles, poems and God knows what every year, in order to prop up literary prices. And instead of paying writers to produce the stuff, Uncle Sam decided to pay us not to. Now there's talk of saving the rain forests by paying Brazilian writers not to write.

It was terrible. Writers who didn't even want the money couldn't compete without it. Bad writers were encouraged to buy more software, to insulate their dens or do television scripts. Good writers got rusty. I can't even sort out a sequence of tenses any more.

That's when some of us went underground. And back to basics. We write with a pencil and paper. We use relatives as fronts. We publish ourselves. Now I write notes from underground, sestinas on the sly, furtive fiction.

That's why I have to use the pseudonym. Dan Akst doesn't mean anything. But without him, I can't write.

"Daniel Akst" is the author of St. Burl's Obituary, a novel. His hopes for a federal handout have so far been thwarted.