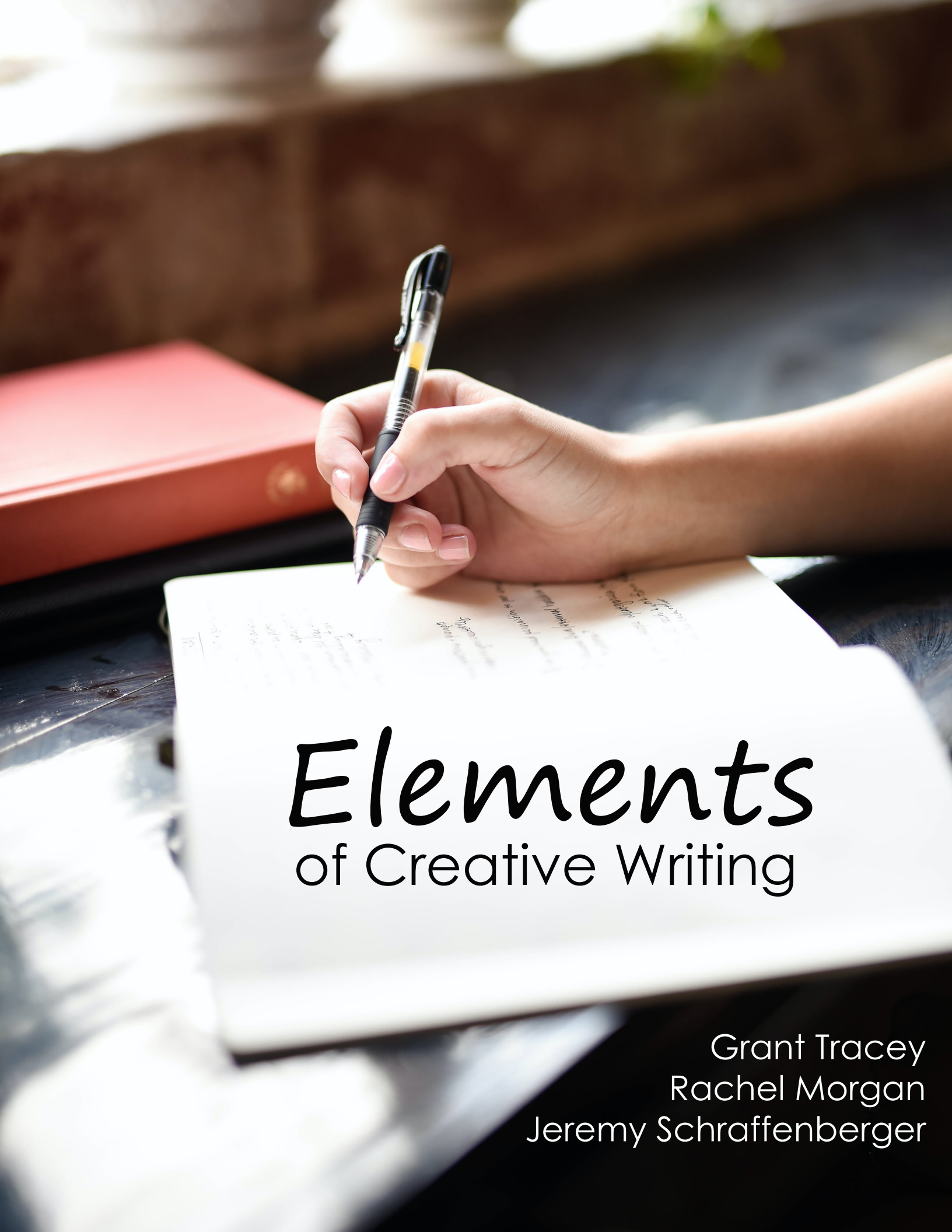

Elements
of Creative Writing

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INTRODUCTION

The Elements of Creative Writing

This free and open access textbook introduces new writers to some basic elements of the craft of creative writing. The authors—Rachel Morgan, Jeremy Schraffenberger, and Grant Tracey—are editors of the *North American Review*, the oldest and one of the most well-regarded literary magazines in the United States. We've selected nearly all of our readings and examples from writing that has appeared in our pages over the years. Because we had a hand in publishing these pieces originally, our perspective as editors permeates this book. As such, we hope that even seasoned writers might gain insight into the aesthetics of our magazine as we analyze and discuss some reasons we think this work is so remarkable—and therefore teachable.

The primary audience for this textbook, however, is the *new* writer, someone who may be enrolled in an introductory class, or perhaps someone who is trying to learn about the craft of creative writing on their own. No matter what brought the writer to this resource, we attempt to break things down to demonstrate principles of what we think makes good writing. We discuss the three genres that we publish in the NAR, each part written by the corresponding editor of that genre: Rachel Morgan covers poetry; Jeremy Schraffenberger covers creative nonfiction; and Grant Tracey covers fiction. Because each of these parts is written by a single person, we've decided to retain the individual voices of each author. You will gain a sense of each editor through their approach to discussing their genre. You will hear the writers and mentors who have influenced them. There will also be some overlap in our discussions of certain elements. All three of us, for instance, discuss imagery at certain points. You'll encounter different discussions of metaphor and other kinds of figurative language. In some cases, lessons in the context of one genre will be equally applicable to other genres. You might even find places in this book where there is some disagreement among its three authors or slightly different ways of thinking about a specific element. As a new writer, you should know that there are no absolutes when it comes to making art. We think we have some important and revealing information to help you become a better writer, but it's vitally important that you hear a multiplicity of voices, understanding that eventually you will need to make up your own mind about what makes good writing. In the end, our goal is not to convince you that we have all the right answers. Rather, our goal is to help you become a writer who is confident enough to make bold and informed decisions in your own work. As teachers, ultimately our job is to make ourselves unnecessary.

This textbook is designed to be used in a multi-genre creative writing class, but you can take or leave whatever parts you like. There is very little in the way of sequencing, so

you can sample individual sections, chapters, or exercises as you find most useful. Because the book is an Open Educational Resource (OER), your teacher might also mix and match, adapt, truncate, or otherwise revise for their own purposes. You might also simply dip into some readings as an anthology of outstanding contemporary creative writing. We anticipate updating this textbook periodically with new work from the *North American Review*. We would love to hear about your experiences with this textbook (nar@uni.edu), as a student or a teacher, so that we might make improvements in future editions. Our hope is that the following chapters will offer some helpful ideas as you hone your craft as a creative writer.

CHAPTER ONE

Creative Nonfiction and the Essay: Beyond "Just the Facts"

The word *genre* gets used quite a bit in creative writing classes, so it might be helpful to learn and keep in mind the different, sometimes overlapping meanings of the word. Quite literally, *genre* means kind, style, sort, or type. It's related to other words like *general*, *generic*, *gender*, even *genetic* and *genius*. In creative writing circles, it is sometimes meant to distinguish between poetry and prose. Poetry is most often composed with an ear toward linguistic music, as discussed in the previous section, and it usually looks different on the page, too, with broken lines that might be organized into stanzas. Prose, on the other hand, is most often composed with the sentence in mind, with unbroken lines organized into paragraphs. This distinction might seem obvious, but some forms of short-short prose or prose poetry can challenge our understanding of genre.

The word *genre* can also be used to distinguish *within* each of these two broad categories. Within poetry, the traditional distinction is between lyric and epic poetry. Since we don't really write epic poems any longer, most contemporary poetry would be considered lyrical, within which you might make further distinctions of style and mode. Within prose, we distinguish between fiction and nonfiction. The word *fiction* is derived from the Latin verb *fingere*, meaning "to shape." We understand that fiction is made up, created out of something that wasn't there before, invented *ex nihilo*, out of nothing except the writer's imagination taking the form of a story.

*Non*fiction, however, is *not* shaped. In other words, it's not invented out of nothing but is assumed to be derived from things that have actually happened and must therefore convey the truth—or at least some version of it. Journalism is nonfiction, as are biographies and histories of various kinds, all of which are beholden to the facts. You might assume nonfiction only cares about communicating the facts and nothing but the facts, but there is another word we attach to nonfiction that brings it to life: *creative.* There is a tension between these two words: to be creative, inventive, and imaginative, on the one hand, and to be beholden to facts and truth on the other. Creative nonfiction as a genre carries with it great potential to generate dynamic writing *because* of this tension—not in spite of it.

The form of creative nonfiction that we will focus on in this textbook is the *essay.* I want to liberate this word from what you most likely associate with it. To your mind, essays might be those things that teachers made you write in school to analyze, to persuade, to argue. Maybe you learned that you weren't allowed to use the first-person pronoun *I* when writing an essay. Maybe you learned somewhere that an essay must have a thesis statement, three pieces of evidence, and five total paragraphs with a conclusion that begins "In conclusion." Among creative writers, however, the essay is far from that old standby template, which might well be useful as a scaffold from which to build other critical writing forms, but has less to offer creative writers as they approach the blank page.

The word *essay* literally means “to try, to test, to experiment.” It might help to know the broad outlines of the essay form’s dual history over the past four hundred years. On the one hand, we have the English tradition from the scientist Francis Bacon (1561-1626), the so-called Father of Empiricism who helped to develop the Scientific Method. Not surprisingly, his writing is systematic, very much concerned with observation and logical argument. In this way, Bacon’s essays are a trial, a test, an experiment. On the other hand, we have the French tradition from the philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), whose essays incorporate personal anecdote and meandering meditations. His writing wanders to and fro, seemingly following his thoughts as they occur to him, trying to discover some insight about the question at hand. In this way, Montaigne’s essays are also a trial, a test, an experiment.

In order to illustrate my point, let’s compare the openings of two essays. Here is Francis Bacon’s “Of Friendship” (1612):

> It had been hard for him that spake it to have put more truth and untruth together in few words than in that speech, “Whosoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a god:” for it is most true, that a natural and secret hatred and aversation towards society, in any man, hath somewhat of the savage beast; but it is most untrue, that it should have any character at all of the divine nature, except it proceed, not out of a pleasure in solitude, but out of a love and desire to sequester a man's self for a higher conversation: such as is found to have been falsely and feignedly in some of the heathen; as Epimenides, the Candian; Numa, the Roman; Empedocles, the Sicilian; and Apollonius of Tyana; and truly and really in divers of the ancient hermits and holy fathers of the church.

Bacon remains focused on establishing the truth of a statement made by Aristotle, teasing out the implications before moving forward in his argument. Montaigne’s essay “Of Friendship” (1588) begins quite differently, however:

> Having considered the proceedings of a painter that serves me, I had a mind to imitate his way. He chooses the fairest place and middle of any wall, or panel, wherein to draw a picture, which he finishes with his utmost care and art, and the vacuity about it he fills with grotesques, which are odd fantastic figures without any grace but what they derive from their variety, and the extravagance of their shapes. And in truth, what are these things I scribble, other than grotesques and monstrous bodies, made of various parts, without any certain figure, or any other than accidental order, coherence, or proportion?

Montaigne begins with a character in a scene, an anecdote. Having observed a painter working for him, he decides not to imitate the man’s process, comparing his own writing instead to the “grotesques and monstrous bodies” the painter leaves for the margins. Montaigne charms while Bacon argues. From Bacon, we get the essay that you’re likely familiar with from English classes. I have come to refer to these instead as *papers* to distinguish them from what I consider the much more artful and inviting tradition of the Montaignian *essay*. Papers require clarity and value concision, and they usually erase the first person pronoun *I* in the interest of

objectivity. The essay, however, allows you to be a little messy (or a lot), to prioritize beauty over other virtues, to be (and express) yourself. While papers often pretend to know the answers beforehand, essays seek them out in the midst of writing. The essays on offer in this textbook have been written in this spirit.

Even so, with this creative liberation comes responsibility. Instead of persuading someone of your point of view or convincing a reader of your well-reasoned argument, you are charged with something far greater, a task more challenging but far more rewarding and longer lasting. You are charged with making art.

What is art? The creative writing class you're likely taking—as well as the design of this book—will cover a range of elements and tools that are meant to help you become a better writer with the eventual aim to create art. These tools are not, by themselves, what make a good artist. Just because you can write a pleasing sentence or render a vivid image doesn't mean that you've created art, not yet at least. But you do need to know how and when to wield those specific tools in order to do so. The tools are necessary but not sufficient. The more you use them—and the more you dwell in their possibilities—the closer you will come to art. To be clear, even as published writers and editors ourselves, we all still consider ourselves approaching art, never quite arriving but always in transit, our reach necessarily exceeding our grasp. Why else continue?

To our mind, the artist is someone who makes the world strange again, allowing a reader to see things anew, as though for the first time. Art must astonish. Art must create a rift in our ordinary, everyday world (however small and temporary) to allow us to see into Reality itself. This is a tall order, I know—and perhaps impossible—but as you embark on your career as a creative writer, know that you're doing so for this deep and important reason. Creative writing is not frivolous. It is not extra. It is vital. It has the power to save your life.

Exercise: Composing Your Artist Soul

To get a sense of the possibilities of writing in the essay form and becoming an artist, read Sofia Samatar's essay "The Unknown Country." Notice that throughout the essay, Samatar presents lists of italicized words. Eventually, we learn that these enigmatic, somewhat opaque words come from Joseph Cornell's collage story *The Crystal Cage*, representing elements that "compose his soul" as an artist. His association with these words is more or less unexplained. As an exercise, make your own list of "things that quicken the heart," dredged from the depths of your inner life, that compose your own artist soul. You may also think of this exercise as simply making a list of words that you are attracted to for one reason or another—or for no explicable reason at all. At this point, making the list may be enough to begin the lifelong composition of your artist soul, but you could develop further ideas for narrative and reflection from any number of these words. At the very least, sharing your list with others in your class or with your writing group can be a good way to get to know each other as people and as writers.

CHAPTER TWO

Truth and Memory, Truth in Memory

As the previous chapter explained, creative nonfiction is a genre of writing derived from the truth, that is, something that actually happened, whether that truth is verifiable through evidence or not. It is vitally important when writing essays to keep in mind that you are making a promise, or establishing a kind of contract with your reader, who expects that you will not be making things up. If you're writing nonfiction of any kind, you cannot lie. To do so would be to break the contract. The reader trusts that you're not fabricating the events that you're writing about.

In 2006 James Frey's bestselling *A Million Little Pieces*, a memoir about his life as an addict, was discovered to contain many fabrications at important moments in the narrative. The controversy sparked a long, ongoing conversation in the nonfiction writing world that asks you to be aware of the need to be truthful when presenting moments of your life. In an interview with *Time*, Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Holocaust survivor, was asked to comment on Frey's memoir. "I don't want to speak of that controversy," he said, "I will say, with memoir, you must be honest. You must be truthful." The writer Isabel Allende agrees, stating in an interview, "A memoir forces me to stop and remember carefully. It is an exercise in truth."

Having to "remember carefully," however, should not keep you from writing daring, inventive essays. An endless source of material for you to draw on is your own memory, which is notoriously unreliable. Your readers expect the truth, but being aware that human memory is faulty, they will give you the benefit of the doubt. In my earliest memory, for instance, I am being held by my father. We're moving to a new house, saying goodbye to this one. We're in my empty bedroom with its shaggy red carpet. I'm holding a book, one of a series displayed on my plastic Mickey Mouse Book Club rack, with Mickey's head and ears sticking out on top. I am a little scared about why we're moving, why everything is changing, where everything has gone. There are other people in the house carrying boxes, carrying things away, carrying *my* things away.

I barely remember any of these details because they only exist in loose snippets and fragments in my memory. I have to take some of it on faith, but there are still some things that I can confirm. I can check with my parents, for instance, about the year we moved from that house, which could help me to flesh out other historical facts. They might even share other details about that house and the circumstances of our move, which could trigger another memory and another. I can consult old photographs or home movies if they exist. I can search online for the Mickey Mouse Book Club. In fact, I did just this search and now have a much clearer picture of what that plastic baby-blue rack and those books looked like. Some details, however, will necessarily remain unclear because they only exist in my mind.

This early memory doesn't seem very significant, but because I remember it, I can't help but attach some greater meaning to it. Now in my mind, it represents the first major change in my life: relocation. The memory exists in relationship to every other moment of relocation in my life,

like a collage. If I wanted to, I could develop some of these memories into an essay about moving, what it has meant to me, what it has meant historically in the United States, what it means today. Memory, therefore, is an endlessly rich source of material, which you should feel invited to draw from.

Ask yourself what your earliest memory is. Why does it hold such fascination to you? This first memory can represent any number of things to you, but it is significant—if only as the literal beginning of your life story. That is, consciousness itself is an ongoing process of narrative. Being aware of yourself as an individual in the world requires that you tell yourself (and others) a story of your identity, of your beliefs and values, of who you are. Your earliest memory, rising as if from a dream, represents Act I, when the curtain rises.

Not only is memory naturally faulty and unreliable, sometimes frustratingly so, it also changes the more we remember. That is, each time you call up your earliest memory, you alter it, even if only slightly. By handling memory in this way, we are constantly shaping who we *are* by shaping who we *were*, further demonstrating the narrative nature of consciousness and identity. Instead of thinking of this fact as a flaw, however, I like to think of it as one of its main virtues, allowing you as a writer much more freedom and flexibility to render your life as you remember it, knowing that it can never be 100% factual and verifiable.

For example, in her essay "A Not So Fine Line," Peggy Schimmelman describes a moment from her childhood when she had felt self-conscious of her house, concerned her family would be considered "white trash" in her poor Ozark community. The specific images and telling details in the scene convince the reader of its truth. Later, however, Schimmelman reflects on the fluid and inherently unreliable nature of memory in "The Trouble with Memoir":

> To hear my older and youngest sisters describe my father, you would swear they were talking about two different men. In my memory, our childhood home stands out as the most dilapidated shack in rural Missouri, but to my younger sister it was "no worse than any other houses around there." Likewise, certain events that were traumatic for one of us might be a dim, unimportant memory for another.

Richard Goodman makes a similar note about crafting dialogue in nonfiction, reminding us that "no writer is expected to be a tape recorder. No writer is expected to render with court reporter precision what someone said a generation ago." In Goodman's case, he was writing about events that took place more than forty years previously in his essay "Arina." In order to capture something of the truth, he advises writers to inhabit who you're writing about as a way to begin remembering what they said. In order to create artful creative nonfiction, you must follow Schimmelman's and Goodman's lead, acknowledging the faultiness of memory but not allowing it to hinder you from writing in the first place. Their essays tell the version of the truth as they remembered it.

While it is important not to lie or make things up when writing creative nonfiction, the purpose of writing it is not to be 100% factual and verifiable anyway. The purpose is to create art. There

may be *other* purposes beside art. For instance, bibliotherapy can have great healing benefit. In fact, when mining and developing your remembered life for material, you may find that you are also dredging up traumatic, emotional, or otherwise difficult memories. It is not unusual in a creative nonfiction classroom for a person to begin crying while sharing their work. My former writing professor, Maria Maziotti Gillan, would say that if you're crying, you know you're onto something important. She would encourage you to go even deeper and to share those difficult things because others will likely be able to identify with your experiences. Traci Brimhall agrees in her essay "On Writing 'Philematophilia,'" which discusses her desire to eat her baby ("Well, ecstatically kiss, maybe. Or pretend eat."), admitting that "anything that makes me feel that uncomfortable almost always has to become a piece of writing for me." In her essay "Proposing a World without a Mother: Grief and Creative Nonfiction as a Sense-Making Tool" Jennifer Gravley acknowledges the difficulty of writing about while grieving over the death of her mother:

> The writing is terrifying. Unthinkable that you could write when your mother was under the ground….You are one telling of the story closer to a telling that will make it hurt less but also one telling of the story closer to a telling that will make it hurt more, and that is essential.

Gravley is able to work through writing as "a time-honored tradition of grief work." Even so, you do have to feel safe to share such things in your writing, so it's important to cultivate a supportive community in the classroom or a writing group. In my experience, sharing painful memories and expressing emotions are themselves tools for establishing just such a community. The writing classroom can become an uncomfortable space if we do not admit up front that we are likely to encounter such memories. As a writer, you will need to choose how vulnerable you are willing to be when sharing your work with others. Either way, as a good member of the writing classroom community, it is absolutely vital that you express sympathy and support for those who do so.

In our everyday lives, we may instinctively avoid thinking about painful things in order to get through the day, but when dredging up memories as a writer, you may find yourself confronting things that are difficult to dwell on. Whitney Curry Wimbish discusses this question in "Write What Scares You vs Trauma Porn," describing two unhelpful ideas in the world of nonfiction. First, writing about trauma might be construed as "self-indulgent…naval-gazing" that amounts to little more than "trauma porn." Second, by avoiding personal traumas in your writing you may be missing an opportunity. Wimbish suggests that these ideas boil down to two imperatives: *Be quiet. Entertain me*. Instead, she offers the following helpful advice:

> Ignore the idea that you should be quiet. Likewise ignore the idea that your story may exist only if it follows a certain script, and even that you must write it for an audience. Instead, just consider whether you, like me, have had to endure things you shouldn't have. Understand that you're not alone. Then go from there.

Where you may go when thinking or writing about difficult memories can only be determined by you. You are never required to write about something you would rather not, but you are always

invited to share openly and honestly pain you may have suffered. Either way, the writing community you are a part of is meant to support you.

The purpose we are focusing on is not creative nonfiction's therapeutic functions and benefits, which may come as a matter of course when writing through trauma toward healing. We are primarily interested in creating art, which I have suggested in the previous chapter is meant to make the world strange again. What better way to make the world strange than by admitting the inherent strangeness of memory itself? To do so, however, you must embrace some new ideas about memory. Namely, you must give up the importance of the *what* in favor of the *why* and *how*. In creative nonfiction, it usually doesn't matter all that much *what* has happened in the past. Rather, what is important is *why* you remember it in the first place and *how* you render it in language. What is absolutely crucial is not the *event* itself but your *relationship* to the memory of that event. In my earliest memory sketched out above, it doesn't really matter that as a young child of maybe three years old I remember the day we moved to another house. Nothing dramatic, significant, or life-altering actually happened. Ho-hum. I was just a little boy being held by his father while carrying a Mickey Mouse book. What is significant, however, is what I make of that memory, how I shape it and put it in conversation with other memories, other facts, other histories. That memory does not contain a merely singular meaning. It is infinitely significant based on my own current mind as a writer.

This fact about writing and memory should ease a bit of the pressure on you. After all, you might assume that in order to write about your own life, you need to have experienced something dramatic or spectacular, remarkable or strange. The writer Flannery O'Connor once asserted that if you survived childhood, you'd have enough material to write about to last the rest of your life. I agree. However mundane or boring you might think your life has been up to this point, it is still very much worth writing about. The smallest, most fleeting of memories can be the seed of something that grows the deepest roots and bears the most nourishing fruit. If you understand your memories as seeds in this way, the next step is to plant them, water and care for them, then observe what blooms, and share it with others.

You may also believe that you have to write about memories that already fit into a larger narrative structure with a traditional beginning, middle, and end. It's true that readers will have certain expectation of storytelling in creative nonfiction, but I want to encourage you to embrace the essay's ability to wander, to meander, to diverge, to begin with Montaigne's "grotesques and monstrous bodies" rather than what we normally think belongs centerstage. Memories do not arrive to us with a ready-made narrative embedded. Rather, in our treatment of them, we discover their meanings and offer them to the reader in whatever ways we can. The only requirement is that the writing is interesting.

That's a vague word, isn't it? *Interesting*. It's like *nice* or *fine*. Nowadays, it either doesn't communicate anything at all or comes across as dismissive. Let's reanimate that word, however, by returning to its Latin roots. *Inter-* means *between*, and *-est* comes from *esse,* which means *to be.* To be *interesting* as a writer means you recognize relationships *between* things rather than worrying about singular events or experiences. To be interesting as a writer means

that you live in a state of between-ness. To be interesting as a writer means you are involved, something important is at stake, your curiosity—and therefore the reader's—has been piqued.

Exercise: Commit to Memory

Nearly everything we write as practitioners of creative nonfiction relies on our memories, whether our essays are lyrical and autobiographical or research-driven and journalistic, in which case we have to remember the facts as we've gathered them. We must also acknowledge that memory is always faulty in some way or other. Because memory is unavoidably unreliable, it is often a good idea—both as an ethical and an aesthetic matter—to acknowledge our own fallibility. Similarly, each time we remember something, each time we reach back into the past to recover and refigure events in our lives, we also alter our memories, revising not just what happened but also our understanding of what happened. In the end, what happened is less important than our relationship to what happened, what we make of our memories.

This exercise will ask that you reach back as far as you can to recount one of your earliest memories, connecting it to some other memory, and then articulating uncertainty about its validity by asking a question. You will also offer the reader an interpretation of the memory while connecting it to your present self somehow.

- Try to recall one of your first memories, however fragmented, blurry, or confusing it might be.
- Connect this memory to another clearer memory that you feel more certain about.
- Ask or imply a question, i.e., express some uncertainty about what is happening in this memory.
- Suggest (to the reader or to yourself as the narrator of the passage) what the memory (or cluster of memories) might mean metaphorically or symbolically.
- Connect the memory (or memories) to your present self.
- Render at least two vivid images in the passage, and appeal to at least three different senses. (See the chapter on imagery and the senses for a more thorough discussion of sensory language.)
- Adapt or ignore the above objectives as needed.

Imagination, Speculation, and Perhapsing

In his 2003 essay in creative nonfiction journal *The Fourth Genre*, "Finding the Inner Story in Memoirs and Personal Essays," Michael Steinberg notes the writer Judith Kitchen's list of five things that her writing students often "deny themselves": retrospection, intrusion, meditation, introspection, and imagination, adding to this list: reflection, speculation, self-interrogation, digression, and projection (188). Taking each in turn, you may think of this list as a series of tools that you might call upon when rendering memory into writing:

> *Retrospection*: looking back, often to summarize or assess the state of affairs from your current position in the present day.

Intrusion: stepping in as the writer to comment upon the event or the experience you're writing about.

Meditation: dwelling deeply in thought upon the memory, as though turning it over in your hand looking for different facets or perspectives.

Introspection: looking inwardly at yourself, honestly appraising your thoughts and actions.

Imagination: developing alternatives to the memory that aren't true but might be.

Reflection: thinking things through and searching for what meaning might be discovered in the memory.

Speculation: asking the question *what if?* and taking your answer seriously.

Self-interrogation: asking yourself hard questions about yourself and sharing your honest answers.

Projection: suggesting a thought or emotion to someone else while acknowledging that you might not be correct.

Digression: allowing yourself to wander or diverge from the memory at hand for the sake of discovery.

Confession: admitting something about yourself that you would rather not.

Each of these tools may be the basis for a fruitful exercise, but the ones I want to draw your attention to here will allow you to develop more material from even the scantest of memories: Imagination and Speculation. In an interview with Jill Talbot, the essayist Jill Christman defines speculation as a "way of finding ideas and empathy beyond the limited confines of my own geography, intellect, experience, and physicality. Speculation cracks memory open like an egg, surprising me and pushing me to a deeper level of accountability and truth." Ironically, by speculating and developing something that *isn't* true, we can arrive at this deeper level of truth. The memoirist Lisa Knopp gives us a handy word to describe this kind of speculation: *perhapsing*. In her essay "'Perhapsing': The Use of Speculation in Creative Nonfiction," she suggests that writers of nonfiction take advantage of imagining possibilities when factual details are missing or fuzzy. By introducing a passage of writing with the word *perhaps* (or other similar words like *maybe*, *suppose*, *if*, *what if*, *might have/could have*, *possibly*, *imagine*, *wonder*, *perchance*), you can develop writing that is vivid, clear, and engaging while not breaking the nonfiction contract with your reader.

You might think that perhapsing is cheating, that you're getting away with something, that you may as well be writing fiction. I would say that instead of revealing a factual truth about the past, perhapsing reveals an *inner* truth about you and your relationship to the past. Your speculation says a lot about you. What's more, as Knopp points out, "When an author's memories of concrete details are sketchy or absent, the technique of perhapsing not only allows her to recreate the scene effectively, it also helps establish her as a reliable narrator." By admitting when and how you are imagining and speculating, the reader is more likely to trust you. Don't "deny yourself" the valuable technique of perhapsing.

A good example of perhapsing comes from Matthew Oglesby's essay "A Quiet Procedure," in which the author visits the abandoned Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded. While touring one of the buildings, he renders an image the former superintendent, who isn't really there: "I could almost see him there now, standing in a window like a ghost in repose…. He is a thin and well-fit man, as I imagine him, with short blond hair and a gossamer complexion so fine you can see the capillaries beneath his skin, little cobwebs of blood." Oglesby is not making things up. He is sharing his imagination with the reader. This image is not of the actual superintendent, but it's a vivid peek inside of the authors mind as he experiences this place.

Follow-Up Memory Exercise: Perhapsing

Starting with the memory in the previous exercise or surfacing another early memory, make a list of things you *don't* know for certain about what you remember. Fill in these gaps by using the word *perhaps* (or the equivalent). Take some liberties, but always remind the reader that you are speculating. Reflect on how this technique changes what direction you might take this piece of writing.

Pictures of You

When mining your own memory for the raw material of creative nonfiction, it is helpful to have some things at hand that might further inspire the vivid details of your life to return, especially if you are remembering events from long ago. Consulting home videos or family photographs can be an extremely valuable way not only to clarify your memory but also to jar loose things that you never would have otherwise thought about at all. Sometimes, these mnemonic images may disappear from the final draft of your essay, but they might also be integrated into the writing itself as a frame. Either way, visual evidence of the past can be extremely helpful.

Christopher Gonzales's pair of essays "Return of the Lost Son" and "My Own Lost Mexico" each lay bare how the writer consults photographs. Both of these pieces are also very much about memory: retrieving it and losing it. In his reflection on writing them, the author explains that he was interested in exploring the idea of writer's block,

> an idea which for me meant those layers of personal archeology and memory lying beneath the surface of consciousness, waiting for articulation and discovery. As a

> person, not a writer, I knew the artifacts were there, the question was how to dig them out without damaging them, losing them, or forgetting where they came from.

In order for Gonzales to retrieve these "artifacts" without damaging them, he starts with photographs. In fact, he begins "My Own Lost Mexico" by describing a photograph of himself writing "Return of the Lost Son." Sometimes these photographs are from his own life, used to jar memory, but he looks at older ones as well to learn about the time before his life as he tries to reconstruct his father's past, "as if the photographs would provide some reason why he denied his family through his willful forgetting." Gonzales consults "a collection of photographs from 1939 of Taylor, my father's boyhood home before his family moved to Austin, displayed at the Library of Congress website," allowing him to paint a concrete picture of this town, populated by "Mexican-American farmers, withered and thin, wearing rugged clothing," while "Farm buildings recede along the road, bordered by utility poles, a few scattered trees, farm wagons, barns, and sheds." Family photographs reveal images of his father as a child, but Gonzales does not find the clue he longs for that would explain his father's troubled life. Even so, the essay ends on a hopeful note: "Putting those memories into words made me feel stronger."

Another essay that uses photographs to jar memory is Mike Ingram's "A Curious Inheritance." "The clearest image I can conjure of my grandfather actually comes from a photograph," he writes, describing how eerily similar he looked like his grandfather when he was young: "We have the same hairline, the same jawline, the same cheekbones, the same eyes." The essay explores the many similarities he shares with his grandfather, from his drinking problem to his agoraphobia. The essay ends in a moment when his grandmother, suffering from dementia, mistakes him for his grandfather. "If this were a piece of fiction," he admits, "I could invent a moment of poignancy. I could allow her to go on believing I was her long-dead husband, and in that disguise I could apologize for everything I'd ever done, all the messes I made and foisted upon her." Ingram holds true to the nonfiction contract with the reader, but the imagined scenario offers us a glimpse into his own desire for closure and reconciliation. Magically, through the art of creative nonfiction, he has it both ways—and so do we.

Sometimes, you may be inspired not only to use photographs as a way to remember the deep past, but also to integrate photography into an essay itself. Tyler Dunning's "Steel Reflections," for instance, which describes a trip to Gateway National Park, is accompanied by seven pictures that his friend, the photographer Alexander Newby, had taken while in St. Louis. While the essay stands on its own, the artful photos add another layer of veracity and verisimilitude. When Dunning notes, "Lightning strikes in the distance right on cue, bringing punctuation to my darker thoughts," the reader marvels when seeing a nighttime photo of the arch with a streak of lightning in the dark sky across the river.

Exercise: Get the Picture?

You will read about a mode of writing in the poetry section of this book called *ekphrasis*, which in Greek simply means *description.* Ekphrastic writing tries to describe a piece of visual art vividly, such that it seems to come to life on the page. For this exercise, you will do something

similar. First, find an old photograph, either of yourself or of people you know well enough that you're comfortable writing about them. Second, simply describe what you *see* in the image, trying to render the depicted scene as clearly as you can. Third, add other senses to this image. What does this photo make you smell, feel, taste, and hear? Then, place this image in relationship to other things that might be happening beyond the frame of the photograph itself, moving through time and/or space to connect to a larger narrative that you might develop. Ask yourself the journalistic questions: who, what, when, where, why, how? Think of the photograph as a clue to a larger story of what happened in the past. Finally, ask yourself: what happens next? As an alternative to this exercise, take some new photographs to document your time in a place. Write a scene that incorporates your favorite pictures that you've taken.

CHAPTER THREE

Research and History

The first two chapters about creative nonfiction have focused a lot of attention on memory and experience. For good reason. Creative nonfiction not only allows us to include such things in our writing, it embraces the personal as a primary means of knowing about the world. Let's shift our attention in this chapter to another means of knowing about the world, namely *research*. Just because we're focusing on research, however, does not mean that we leave the personal and experiential behind. The creative essay that relies on research does not necessarily erase the personal. These two approaches can be mutually reinforcing, or they might even coincide in surprising but fruitful ways. For our purposes, we will not focus on the nuts-and-bolts tools of conducting research (for which you are invited to consult your friendly local librarian!) but rather the potential uses of research in your writing once you've located it, especially as a way to generate new material for further development. To be clear, the kind of research you do for creative writing will differ in both method and effect from research you do in other kinds of classes. When writing a critical essay for another class, for instance, you would be wise to work within the boundaries defined by your instructor, as well as the conventions of that academic discipline. While the practice of creative writing is, indeed, a subject taught in the academy, it is primarily an artistic discipline rather than an academic one. You don't need a degree to write compelling stories, poems, and essays, but you likely do need a degree to become a physicist, a sociologist, an economist, and so on. Either way, I hope you can approach research for your essays with the same urgency and passion you pursue your creative work with.

You can experience great joy in conducting research for your creative work. One of Lance Larsen's "Aphorisms for a Lonely Planet" puts it this way:

> Said Sappho, said Milton, said Simone de Beauvoir, said Harry Houdini. I love doing research. I love to corral quirky minds into one paragraph until they coalesce. It's like throwing a dinner party for the ages, and all the genius misfits gather around the same chipped punch bowl, and they're a little pissed.

Through research, you can invite any number of "genius misfits" to your party. You only have to go find them. But where do you start? All research starts with a question—or at the very least a curiosity. This question or curiosity need not be clearly articulated for it yield fruitful results. In fact, it might be quite fuzzy. Regardless, you must be curious enough about something to try to find an answer, even if an absolute answer is impossible. For instance, in the previous chapter about memory, you might remember snippets and fragments of your childhood, but some details remain unclear. Perhaps you could consult older family members to find the answers, but they themselves might not remember all the facts. Even personal questions can require research to answer: What was the name of the camp you went to in sixth grade? Where did your ancestors live? How long has that restaurant you worked at been in your home town? Who built your house?

Beyond research to find the details behind your personal experience, you might also wish to develop more fully the social and cultural context around your memories. In my half-remembered earliest memory above, I described a blue Mickey Mouse book rack. This memory prompted me to do a little digging. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Disney company published a series of books featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Bambi, and other characters. These books represent one thread of the larger history of the Disney Company, beginning with Walt Disney in the 1930s through the Mickey Mouse Club in the 1950s and beyond. My little memory might be the spark of a longer essay *not* about relocation and the pain of moving from one house to another as a child, as I had imagined above, but about the commercialization of children's entertainment in the twentieth century, my own experiences being only small examples of this global phenomenon. The final form such an essay might take would be determined by the angle you take as a writer and researcher.

The point here is that research is never a singular activity. As a creative writer, you must remain open to the possibilities that arise when investigating one thing or another. In fact, in other research contexts, you are compelled to remain focused on your research question, tuning out other facts and distracting details that pop up as you proceed. In creative writing, however, I would encourage you to follow any and all leads that strike you as interesting, especially if you are finding connections you hadn't anticipated. For instance, William Stobb's brief essay "Doom" exemplifies the ways that research can open many different paths. In this case, he doesn't shut any of them off, letting each unfurl, flitting from one image or idea to the next, from the opening of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, to the video game *Doom*, to the original meaning of the word in Old English. Regardless, Stobb connects these disparate pieces through his attention to the various senses of *doom*.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Traci Brimhall's essay "Philematophilia" discusses her desire to eat (or "ecstatically kiss") her baby, leading her to ask a curious question: "Why did I see my son's milky cheeks and feel an overwhelming desire to consume him?" To attempt an answer to the question, she couldn't just narrate her experiences. She had to do some research, which led to more questions. She describes some of these questions in "On Writing 'Philematophilia'":

> Research gave me guesses, but mostly it gave me a new puzzle—why is there all this science on erotic desire and so little on the kiss? The greeting kiss, the subservient kiss, the pleasure kiss, the goodbye kiss, the French, the peck, the make-out marathon? I found studies that suggested touch helped me bond with my son, but nothing confidently or concretely declared why such an appetite might announce itself in me with new motherhood.

Brimhall's engaging essay was born not only of a personal feeling and experience, but also genuine curiosity and focused research.

What I hope you discover when conducting creative writing research is the inevitable interconnectedness of everything. I don't mean that sentence to sound mystical or

metaphysical. I mean it literally. It should be reassuring to you that anything in the world is appropriate fodder for your writing. Anything at all: gravel, TV commercials, shoelaces, kissing, toothpaste, fire, snow, garages, mitochondria. It's up to you as a writer to find and tease apart those connections in ways that will be compelling to your reader. There is great joy in writing (and reading) when you can also learn new facts about the world, and by no means is research a tool only applicable to creative nonfiction. You may be inspired to conduct research for fiction and poetry, too.

Exercise: Curiouser and Curiouser

The seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal believed that "the chief malady of man is restless curiosity about things which he cannot understand; and it is not so bad for him to be in error as to be curious to no purpose." For Pascal, curiosity was akin to vanity, suggesting that it challenged one's faith in God. I'd like to repurpose that phrase "restless curiosity," suggesting that in it lies the basis of all good research, as long as you are not "curious to no purpose." The genuine desire to learn something new can lead to significant insights that inform your essays if you tap into the natural human instinct to look for suitable answers to questions.

For this exercise, recall a specific, memorable time when you consumed or interacted in some way with a popular cultural artifact. This memory should be something that you find yourself inherently interested in, something that you are already somewhat curious about, if not deeply informed on. The above examples include a children's book, a movie, and a video game, but you might focus on a TV show, a commercial, a comic book, a song, an album, a concert, a sporting event, a podcast, a board game, and so on. Render in concrete images everything that you can remember about your experience and the circumstances surrounding it. Activate your "restless curiosity" by devising a list of creative research questions about this cultural artifact. When and where was it created? Who created it, and why? What were the circumstances that led to its popularity? What can you learn about this artifact that you don't already know and that would reveal something about the phenomenon itself? Now describe scenic details of the environment where and when you experienced it, including as many of your senses as possible. Explain what the experience of this artifact meant to you then, including perhaps what it means to you now as you're remembering it. Integrate information you have gathered in your research, allowing yourself to pause and reflect on how this research has changed your understanding. Depending on how much time you have in your class this exercise could be the basis for a full-blown essay, or it might remain only a brief passage to be developed later.

Exercise: A Personal Prehistory

Our individual circumstances might look different, but we have all had some experience as part of a family, whether you're related biologically or not. Families represent the first ways we came to understand ourselves in relation to others. While creative nonfiction allows us to tap into our own memories and life stories, another ripe opportunity for research is to dig into the life stories of older family members, especially if those people are still alive and available for an interview.

Leila Christine Nadir's "Cold War" delves not only into her own memories of growing up with an Afghan father and American mother but also the story of their meeting in college in the 1970s, some of which is based on her questioning her mother about the details:

> "In college your father sexually harassed me," she quipped angrily when I pushed her on the subject. "I passed his house on my way to class. He sat outdoors smoking cigarettes and yelled at me from his porch. He said one day I'd marry him, that I was going to be his wife, and I told him to leave me alone."

Because she interviews her mother, Nadir is able to begin her quest to understand her parents by eliciting a small but telling detail, developing and complicating the image throughout the essay. Rather than being able to interview someone to get small details, Andrew Jones's poignant, second-person essay "Recipe for Reloading" relies solely on memory and speculation as he paints a loving portrait of his dead father in the context of reloading shotshells in his garage. Jones knows that he can learn more about the recipes for reloading shells the way his father did if he would consult "one of the small, spiral-bound books your father left waiting for you on his workbench."

For this writing exercise, select an older family member to write about. You may decide to begin in your own personal memories of this person, but you should consider casting back further into the past as Nadir has done. If possible, interview your family member, asking them details about their lives. If that is not possible, consider consulting other resources, artifacts, or relics of this person. How do these images and scenes influence the way you think of this person? How have your memories changed, if at all?

On the Ground

Sometimes, you may need to do research only to find one small fact that fleshes out an essay you're working on. What kind of trees grow in that region? What was the unemployment rate in 1982? What caused the fall of the Roman Empire? You might find quick answers to these questions in a book or online, and then the research process is over: you have your answer and can move on to the important work of writing itself. At other times, however, you may be inspired to do research on the ground, immersing yourself in a place or contemporary context in order to learn about it more deeply, more immediately. For the purposes of this class, you might be unlikely to do the kind of intense, immersive research that requires a lot of advanced planning, time, and expense, but it's hard to replace direct experience when writing about a topic. For instance, if I were to pursue my proposed essay above about Disney, I could not go back in time, but there are some things I could do. In addition to purchasing a book I remember having as a child, *Pinnochio and his Puppet Show Adventure* from the 1970s, I might decide to watch the new *Pinnochio* movie in the theater itself. Perhaps I could stream the older version of the movie from 1940. What I would be doing here is supplementing book research with experiential research. Such experiential research offers you as a writer the potential to develop a scene rather than rely solely on narration. In this case, I would have occasion to describe the taste of

popcorn, the feel of the seats, the sound of the projector, the light flickering on the screen. Who knew research could be so much fun?

A good example of an essay informed by on the ground research is Matthew Oglesby's "A Quiet Procedure," mentioned briefly above, in which the author visits the abandoned Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded in Lynchburg, Virginia. The essay tells the history of this institution's role in the American eugenics movement of the early twentieth century, but it is animated by Oglesby's presence in the place itself:

> Dead as it was now, I could see the Colony as it had once been. The women dressed and out of bed, tending the cows and pigs and chickens, plucking vegetables from vinewrapped garden stakes. Their tiny bent figures, pulling up weeds and trimming hedges, hauling buckets of water and heaps of unpinned laundry. The women assigned to kitchen duty shuffle along the narrow avenue towards the cafeteria, looking almost identical in their standard-issue cotton dresses, gray as the morning, gray as bucket water, wraiths of mist curling about them.

The author does not actually see these vividly described women, but because he is on the ground, he is invited to imagine them in a way he might not have otherwise been able to do. After being shown the building where sterilizations took place, he realizes that "in my past attempts to imagine the Colony, I was most interested in the landscape and atmosphere of the place," but the "larger story here—and the one I was missing for so many years—is the story of power and how those who have it use their privilege to subjugate the weak." Not only did visiting this place allow Oglesby to describe it in specific, concrete ways, but he might not have arrived at this important insight about power and privilege, connecting it eventually to our current political situation: "Controlling female sexuality and reproduction are still charged topics…. We still criminalize mental illness. We still criminalize poverty. Minorities and immigrants are still considered undesirable populations." This essay is steeped in research, but were it not the author's direct experience, it would never have been brought to life and made so immediately relevant.

One subgenre of creative nonfiction that relies on complete immersion in on the ground research is travel writing. There is no need for our purposes to detail the long history of travel writing from the ancients to today. Rather, I only want you to keep in mind that the spirit of all travel writing is a desire to render a specific place from a new point of view, offering an audience a glimpse into a location that is likely unfamiliar to the reader: its culture, its history, its landscape, its food, its language, its people. The key to good travel writing is to do so from your own unique perspective, through your authentic voice. Travel writing is never simply a faithful report on what the writers sees and does—though that is part of it. Rather, it should convey something of the observing consciousness as well.

Travel writing highlights the pleasure of conducting research in creative nonfiction, not writing about what you already know but rather learning something new and writing *toward* what you want to know. Pico Iyer, one of the foremost travel writers working in English today, says, "We

travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate." Open your heart. Open your eyes. You don't have to be a seasoned expert as a travel writer. Rather, you must approach a place as a conscientious outsider writing to other interested outsiders.

In her travel essay "Like Losing Three Sardinias," Barbara Haas recounts a trip to a winery in Balaclava on the Crimean Peninsula, describing the landscape in meticulous, scenic detail. While tasting a wine, however, she experiences the deep, bloody history of the place, which had been on her mind:

> That first mouthful embodied exactly the terroir and conveyed a direct incarnation of the vineyard itself. The flavor was very expressive of Balaclava, its spirit and physiology, the way grapes and culture had entwined here for millennia. The flavor bundled within it even that day in 1854 which included indelibly the tragedy of war.

Throughout the trip, Haas is haunted by the past: "I found it hard to focus on the sommelier's words as she curated the tasting for us, because my heart had not quite caught up just yet." Rather than focusing solely on the pleasant experience of the wine tasting, she opens her heart, as Iyer suggests we do, to learn more about the world around her, sharing her thoughts and feelings with the reader. Hass's essay reminds us that good travel writing must always be about more than just the travel itself. What the larger point is can only be determined by honest observation of the sensory experiences around you as well as an unflinching exploration of your interiority in the midst of travel.

Patrick Hicks's travel essay "In the Ruins of the Third Reich" is based not on one trip to Berlin but many visits over the years since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989: "I've returned to Berlin many times since that first visit. What can I say? I love the place." The benefit of a piece of travel writing describing many different trips is that Hicks was able to cover a lot of ground, including observations and deep historical research on a variety of locations, from the Berlin Wall and the Brandenburg Gate, to Hitler's Führerbunker and the Holocaust Museum. Hicks ends by reminding us that travel writing is more than tourism. Other places and their histories have something to teach us, if we only pay attention. "To visit these places is to hope that fascism might never again march into the halls of power," he writes. "After all, if it happened here, what's to prevent it from happening again?"

Exercise: The Road Less Traveled By

This exercise will require you to go to an unfamiliar place in order to do experiential research. You need not travel to another country as Barbara Haas and Patrick Hicks did, but you should still think of it as travel writing anyhow even if you're not venturing very far away. Choose a location (near or far) where you have never been, a place that is open to the public, where you might be allowed to spend a good amount of time inconspicuously—and where you might conceivably interact with other people. Observe all the sights, sounds and other sensory experiences around you. What do you notice, and why? If you're able to do so without being

noticed, you might find it helpful to take pictures or short videos of things you find interesting. At the same time, jot down the thoughts and feelings that you're having that are related to this place. Before returning home, spend as much time here as you can, opening your heart and your eyes, as Iyer suggests, to whatever might come your way. From the external observation and the interior reflection in your notes, write a short scene meant to convey to an unfamiliar audience a sense of being in this place and what might be learned there. At the same time, develop a larger idea that you thread through the scene with narration. Depending on the angle you take, you might be required to follow up with book research, too. Here are some ideas of places you might visit and the larger ideas you might reflect on:

- Go to a diner or all-night restaurant where you can nurse a cup of coffee for a few hours. Reflect on your relationship to food. Develop ideas about cultural assumptions or phenomena around food and eating.
- Go to a highway rest area. Reflect on your relationship to travel. Develop ideas about road trips. Alternatively, take a ride on a local public bus or train, and develop ideas about public transportation.
- Go to a church or other place of worship. Reflect on your relationship and experiences with religion. Develop ideas about faith and belief. Alternatively, go to a cemetery. Reflect on death, and develop ideas about mortality.
- Go to a public park. Reflect on your relationship with green spaces. Develop ideas about recreation. Alternatively, go to a local sporting event you've never attended and develop ideas about the culture of sport and athletics.

In the News

The past has much to offer the writer of creative nonfiction, but research doesn't have to be solely historical. Current events can inspire research for your writing as well. In fact, they remind us that we're always immersed in the flow of history. Our job as writers is to pluck interesting stories from the unending sequence of things happening, day after day after day. Peruse any newspaper, and you will find the seeds of any number of interesting stories that you might cultivate. Remember Pico Iyer's idea that travel writing allows us to "learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate." What can newspapers *not* accommodate? Because one of the core principles of journalism is objectivity, their profession dictates that they must be more Baconian than Montaignian. Reporters are meant to write only about the facts of noteworthy events without diverging into other territory, personal or otherwise. As we've established in the first chapter, such divergence in creative nonfiction is an important feature not a bug.

Megan Sandberg-Zakian's "No Relation" offers a perfect example of how to write an engaging piece of creative nonfiction based on current events. Her "restless curiosity" about the story of the African American birder Christian Cooper being harassed by a white woman, Amy Cooper, walking her dog in Central Park. Sandberg-Zakian's initial observation that newspapers invariably noted that there was "no relation" between the two Coopers, leads her to identify with each of them for different reasons. She watched videos online of the event in question, looked

up the history of the name Cooper, and conducted genealogical research, coming to understand more deeply our inevitable interconnectedness, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As you consider finding places for original material in your own writing, don't forget that you can access newspapers for what's currently going on in the world. Perhaps you will be even more interested in looking through local newspapers, where you might already have a previous connection or experience. The key to accessing the news as a source for creative nonfiction is to cultivate a personal relationship, even if it's only your identification with one or more of the people involved. Find *yourself* in the news.

CHAPTER FOUR

Writing Environments

So much of what we have discussed in these chapters about creative nonfiction is about personal memories and experiences. Even if you're conducting research about far-flung people and events, you may still feel an instinct to make your essays about yourself. Another way to learn more about who we are, however, is to consider *where* we are. You can call it nature writing, landscape writing, environmental writing, or even ecological writing. Regardless, the natural non-human world has much to offer the writer of creative nonfiction. Though you might need to adjust your expectations if you live in an urban space, you are still embedded in the world of natural forces and processes that are available to us all: heat, cold, rain, wind, snow, not to mention the sun, the stars, the moon, the earth beneath your feet, even if it's buried under concrete. Within civilization is the wild. Within culture is nature. The greatest trick that culture ever played is the denial of our inevitable immersion in nature.

There is a long tradition of nonfiction writing about the non-human natural world in the United States. We may as well mark its modern beginning in the 1840s with the Transcendentalists, namely the work of Henry David Thoreau, which was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The Transcendentalists represent the American flourishing of the ideas of European Romanticism, and if you've grown up in the United States, you are heir to these ideas. In his essay "Nature," Emerson lays out some foundational ideas that helped to define the principles of modern nature writing, including developing "an original relation to the universe." In other words, he argues that we should have direct contact with the world, observing with our own senses rather than relying on the interpretation or distillation from others. In one of the most famous passages from that essay, Emerson describes the sublime feeling that comes from being immersed in the wilderness:

> Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

One way to understand Emerson's somewhat mystical description is to consider it a radical shift in his point of view. In our everyday lives, we see the world through a naturally anthropocentric point of view. That is, we center human needs and interests first and foremost, taking into account other the perspective of organisms (or entire ecosystems) secondarily (if at all). When his "mean egotism vanishes," he shifts to an ecocentric point of view, identifying with the natural world around him and becoming "part or particle of God."

Thoreau echoes Emerson's phrasing in his essay "Walking," arguing that we should "regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." Similarly, he advocates for immersion in wilderness, even if it is difficult to shift the human point of view: "But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods?" To have an experience worthy of the grand American tradition of the nature writing, you must be completely in your senses, leaving worldly affairs at the entrance to the woods.

Exercise: Take A Hike

While it is not necessary to go on a grand wilderness adventure to write well about an environment, it is sometimes easier to become Emerson's "transparent eye-ball" or "part and parcel of Nature" if you are able to travel to a wilderness area of some kind uninhabited by humans. If you're in a city, that might mean strolling through a park in a city or walking alongside a river. For this exercise, choose a wild place to visit and take a walk, leaving behind writing implements and trying to remain "in your senses." Avoiding thinking about the world outside of this place right now. You may not experience "immortal beauty," but when you return to your desk, describe what you saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, as well as how this place made you feel emotionally or spiritually.

The Literature of Place

In his essay "Ice," Neil Mathison makes a case for the centrality of place in defining who we are. "Does place shape how we see the world?" he asks.

> Having grown up in the Puget Sound country, and having returned to live here much of my adult life, I like to believe that our geography shaped me and shaped my neighbors: the uplift of mountains signifying a world that always transforms to something new; the tidal refreshing of our bays and estuaries reminding us that so much in the world is renewable; the ice caps glistening on our mountaintops cautioning us that even on the hottest days we live in a world of season.

Instead of using the term "nature writing," another way to frame such work is calling it the literature of place. Doing so invites writing about any place at all, wild, rural, urban, or otherwise. Even so, the literature of place is still heir to the tradition of nature writing described above. In his essay "A Literature of Place," Barry Lopez, longtime *North American Review* Contributing Editor, meditated on this mode of writing "about geography as a shaping force, not a subject," as necessary for human happiness.

> Over time I have come to think of these three qualities—paying intimate attention; a storied relationship to a place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place—as a fundamental human defense against loneliness. If you're intimate with a place, a place with whose history you're familiar, and

> you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you're there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned.

In order to achieve such a "storied relationship," Lopez suggests that we become vulnerable to a place, establishing intimacy with it. He offers more practical advice to the would-be writer of place:

> my first suggestion would be to be silent. Put aside the bird book, the analytic state of mind, any compulsion to identify, and sit still. Concentrate instead on *feeling* a place, on deliberately using the sense of proprioception. Where in this volume of space are you situated? The space behind you is as important as what you see before you. What lies beneath you is as relevant as what stands on the far horizon. Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical hemisphere you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? Through what kind of air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief you *can* smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place—the tensile strength in a willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves. Open a vertical line to the place by joining the color and form of the sky to what you see out across the ground. Look *away* from what you want to scrutinize in order to gain a sense of its scale and proportion. Be wary of any obvious explanation for the existence of color, a movement. Cultivate a sense of complexity, the sense that another landscape exists beyond the one you can subject to analysis.

In his essay "Landscape and Imagination," Scott Russell Sanders echoes much of what Lopez has to teach us, emphasizing intimacy: "To be intimate with a landscape is to know its moods and contours as you would know a lover's." Sanders suggests that returning to a place after time away clicks this knowledge into the focus, quoting T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* to make his point:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

To know a place, Sanders suggests, requires "an uncommon degree of attentiveness and insight. It requires one to open wide all the doors of perception. It demands an effort of imagination, by which I mean not what the Romantics meant, a projection of the self onto the world, but rather a seeing of what is already there, in the actual world. I don't claim to possess the necessary wisdom or subtlety, but I aspire to, and I work at it." Nevertheless, Sanders notes that the land is legible if we can learn how to read it: "Like all landscapes, that of Indiana is a palimpsest, written over by centuries of human scrawls and by millenia of natural ones…. Despite our centuries of scrawling on the landscape, we can still read the deeper marks left by nature." It may be difficult to read through the many layers of time, but the stories available to us when writing about place are inexhaustible.

At first glance, Lopez's and Sanders's advice might seem like a tall order, but the beauty of the literature of place is that we all have access to places every day of our lives. We are always existing in a specific place, even if it's not a non-human, natural place. You can always deepen your understanding of specific places by incorporating further research beyond our immediate, phenomenal experiences. Taylor Brorby's brief essay "Confluence" does just that, beginning by setting a historical scene with Lewis and Clark at the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, then integrating information about their geological formation, before offering a personal moment of standing "in the sand, slowly sinking, the sun streaking over your back, staring at the meeting point—a ripple, a squiggle, nature in itself—as two western rivers merge into one." Brorby is not simply painting a pretty picture of the landscape. He recognizes that "this gathering spot of water, contains significance. More to the point: This place contains story." To be sure, Brorby has a personal connection to this place—and he has done his homework on its deep history—but the confluence of these two rivers also serves as a rich symbol for his life, shifting and changing over time. In his keynote speech "The River of Imagination," delivered at the *North American Review*'s Writing Conference in 2019, Brorby points to the importance of reclaiming rural spaces, emphasizing the power of storytelling in an age of climate change:

> The imagination is strong and it is resilient. Though the bottleneck we find ourselves in is narrow, the power of creation is great. This isn't a silver lining to the biological catastrophe we now live in, it's just reality. It is the work we are called to do: to envision the world as it could be, rather than the way it is. A good story can move the universe an inch.

Another essay of place that develops symbolic resonances similar to Brorby's "Confluence" is Maya Kapoor's "Memory Snags," an account of hiking the Santa Catalina Mountains in southern Arizona. "I move every few years for work, school, connection," Kapoor writes, admitting, "I don't have an intimate read on this landscape, a deep knowledge of this place. I could easily pass through the Sonoran Desert and its mountains with no clear sense of ecology or of history." She learns that the dead alligator junipers she finds there are "the ghosts of climate past. In the desert's desiccating air, plants tell stories, pose riddles, with what they leave behind: saguaros with their ribs, wildflowers with their seeds, alligator junipers with their standing dead." The landscape itself becomes a teacher: "History in tree form, confronting my assumptions from sunlit mountainside." In the confluence of rivers and the alligator juniper snags, Brorby and Kapoor find story and develop apt symbols for understanding their places in the world.

Exercise: Going Places

The first, most important part of writing compelling essays about place is, of course, observation and description of the place itself so that readers can imagine themselves there. It's important to write vividly and concretely about what you experience through your senses. Brorby and Kapoor remind us, however, that readers crave deeper meanings that speak to larger concepts in our lives, whether it is the confluence as a symbol for intersections and change, or the juniper snag as a ghostly symbol for climate change and our ever shifting sense of normality. Locate a place where the non-human natural world is observable. When you visit, take note of the environment

around you, describing it as clearly as possible. The next part might take some time and deep reflection: focus on some element of the place you have chosen, asking yourself what larger significance it might suggest. As a way to develop a metaphor or symbol, fill in the blank. This _____ is like a _____. This tree is like a sad old man. This river is like a restless child. This dirt is like the air we breathe. It doesn't matter. Just fill in the blanks with whatever makes sense in your mind, even if at first it might seem strange. Develop one or more of these similes into your descriptive scene, expanding and explaining the comparison as you see fit.

Exercise: Animal Magnetism

One fruitful way to approach writing about place is to observe the non-human animals residing there. Brorby's vivid description of the paddlefish brings his essay "Confluence" to life, from its "Tiny, onyx-colored eyes lodged in its head, a heterocercal tail balances its head, and a large, paddle-shaped snout protrudes from its face. The snout is shoveled into the bottom of the silt-heavy rivers to dislodge roots, small shellfish, and anything meaty." Even the smallest creatures can be fascinating, however, if you pay close enough attention: bugs, birds, and rodents are ubiquitous. Have you ever stopped to watch a colony of ants teeming on the sidewalk? Sparrows splashing in a puddle? Squirrels chittering in the trees? Aside from common animals you can see in your front yard, you might also venture forth into more remote areas to observe other, less commonly seen animals. Will Wellman's essay of place "To a Great Egret" focuses on these majestic birds, which "stand over three feet tall with a long, snake-like neck and brilliant, white plumage on wings that can extend nearly six feet in width. In flight, the egret's long s-shaped neck compresses inwards until its head merges with the body, the neck looking like a giant Adam's apple." Wellman writes that sometimes "the egret's presence transforms all that surrounds it, and a deeper sense is brought to the world." For this exercise, observe a non-domestic animal in its natural habitat, describing it, allowing its presence to transform the place. Write about what you feel after having paid such close attention to another living creature.

Other Places

In her essay "I Was From Where She Had Been From," Jennifer Gravley explores her place in the world by describing the experience, as Lopez puts it above, of being "forgotten, cut off, abandoned" by where she is from in the American South, choosing instead to blend in with "the generic middle-class Americans I would keep trying to be." Gravley grew to regret "my earliest self-improvement project and burned with proper shame. Here's the truth: I will never get back what I threw away." What she thinks she has thrown away is a storied relationship to place, which her essay ironically captures some vivid images and experiences of. Writing about where you are from, whether it's a place you still live or are remembering from your childhood, is a familiar and rich source of material for writers of creative nonfiction. In fact, being far away from a place you had lived in earlier in your life might crystallize its significance for you.

As mentioned above, writing good creative nonfiction about a place does not need to involve visiting the wilderness. In fact, some place writing captures the experience of living in the city. Though Tyler Dunning's previously mentioned essay "Steel Reflections" is about a National

Park, it happens to be located in the heart of a major urban area. Another good example is Richard Goodman's essay "Arina," which might at first seem like a portrait of a woman, but it is just as much a compelling if melancholy portrait of the "land of painters" in the pre-gentrified Soho in the summer of 1980. As you consider places to write about in your creative nonfiction, don't forget about those that you might have a fraught relationship with, whether it's your hometown you haven't been back to in years, or a place you spent a short amount of time long ago. Rendering an authentic sense of a specific location honors the environments we find ourselves in, but it also grounds the reader in the world, transporting them to another place.

CHAPTER FIVE

Notes on Style

You may not have spent much time thinking about writing style. When it's taught in English classes, style is often conflated with the rules of grammar that you're penalized for breaking. For generations, this prescriptive approach to writing has undermined any sense of the creative possibilities of paying close attention to style. William Strunk and E. B. White's classic *The Elements of Style* exemplifies this prescriptive approach. You have likely been exposed to a number of its principles of good writing, like "Use the active voice." The problem with such advice is that it tends to simplify complexity and erase context. Strunk and White themselves acknowledge the limitations of the rule: "This rule does not, of course, mean that the writer should entirely discard the passive voice, which is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary." Even so, this acknowledgement of nuance hasn't stopped a certain brand of pedant from mindlessly reproducing the simplistic adage "Use the active voice" at the expense of better stylistic choices. For instance, take a look at the following sentences from Maya Kapoor's essay "Memory Snags":

> It's no coincidence that most of these standing dead, these memories, are framed by the windows of my car. My car, even more than the sharp smell of junipers, possibly even more than the view of tawny cliffs stretching above canyons, or trails under puffed out pines, symbolizes outdoor escape to me.

The first sentence employs the passive voice "are framed." It would be easy enough to rephrase the sentence, "It's no coincidence that the windows of my car frame most of these standing dead, these memories." This revision, however, would completely undo the transition to "My car" in the next sentence. If Kapoor were to blindly follow the rule "Use the active voice," these sentences would not flow together so well.

Other grammatical "rules" are not really rules at all. Prepositions are perfectly good words to end sentences with. And you can begin a sentence with a conjunction if you want. I ain't even gonna mention some of them there other rules. The style of a formal report will necessarily differ from a memoir's because you have different audiences and purposes for writing them. In all cases, context calls the tune. Any and every rule, principle, or guideline should be broken when to do otherwise would distort or diminish your writing. The trick is knowing what you're doing and why. In these chapters, we're focusing on creative nonfiction, but the same holds true whether you're writing a poem, story, essay, or something in between. Instead of worrying about following rules, then, it is more important to learn how to understand your stylistic choices. For instance, in her lyrical essay "Beauty," Wendy Gaudin's prose slips into dialect: "Those white women on stately porches and riding in calfskin carriages: they hated them some Beauty." The effect is a shift in tone to the vernacular, the spoken, the everyday. This effect is important and impactful enough that Gaudin returns to this phrasing in the final sentence of the essay: "Yes, they hated them some Beauty."

Language is, quite literally, infinite. There is no end to the number of different ways you might write a sentence. The goal of this section, therefore, is not to be exhaustive but to point out what I think are some helpful elements of English style and syntax, which I hope will open the vast menu of options available to you as a writer. The goal is for you to become more informed and confident about the choices you make. Learning about style is one way to sharpen the tools necessary for making such choices and creating art, but remember that the tools themselves are necessary but not sufficient. Art is a subjective endeavor. As such, there can be no absolute right or wrong, as a prescriptive grammarian might have it, but you can still analyze aspects of language in order to understand it more deeply.

So far, I have used an important word four times in this chapter: choices. It might be true that following the prescriptive rules of grammar does not by itself make good writing, but you should still become intimately familiar with the way language works in order to understand the decisions you make as a writer, including the alternative decisions you might have made. Writers constantly make decisions. It's easy to get stymied if you think about writing as a series of deliberate decisions, so I want to encourage you to think about writing as a recursive process. To create truly transformative art, you have to free your mind from the constraints of everyday life. Sometimes that means you must first make a big mess only to return to it later to clean things up as necessary, again and again and again. It helps me to think of all of my early drafts of writing as provisional. I can be bold knowing that if I later judge that boldness to be a mistake, I can always change it.

I'm talking, of course, about the revision process. I would argue that revision begins from the very beginning, before you ever write a single word. Revision is a state of mind, an attitude you bring to your work, a promise to yourself and to the art you are creating that you will care enough to return, reconsider, reimagine. Revision is not a single activity. It is a disposition that permeates your relationship to your art. I mention revision in the context of style, but it's true about every aspect of writing, from large structural elements like plot and point of view, to the smallest of stylistic choices like punctuation and diction.

Here is a final caveat about becoming a better writer by understanding the choices you make. Sometimes you will make deliberate decisions about your writing. Should I start my essay with a scene or a summary of the narrative situation? What specific image should I describe in this moment? Should I include dialogue? You can answer each of these questions, knowing that you are doing so for a specific reason. You must allow yourself to make other decisions, however, intuitively. As an artist, constant deliberation and conscious decision-making might make your work stiff and lifeless. Sometimes you will stumble into the right choice. You have to give yourself permission to discover what you hadn't anticipated in advance. For instance, you are confronted with the decision after decision: first person or third person, present tense or past tense, and on and on. It's okay to begin writing, allowing yourself to go with what feels right, leaving deliberation for later.

Exercise: A Matter of Form

The Canadian philosopher and media theorist Marshall McLuhan is most famous for coining the phrase, “The medium is the message.” That is, the form (or medium) of a message communicates just as much as (if not more than) its intended content. Another way to understand this insight is to recognize that *how* you communicate something is *also* communicating something in itself. For instance, imagine a scene in which someone asks you what time it is. How would you describe the differences among these replies?

> What do you care?
> Noon.
> Time for you to get a watch.
> Almost noon.
> It’s almost noon, mister.
> It is 11:58 a.m., sir.

Obviously, the level of courtesy, familiarity, and specificity differ among these responses. Your style communicates very loudly information about your relationship with this person and the larger context of the scene. McLuhan’s theories about media are much more wide ranging than we need to discuss here. Suffice it to say, your writing style carries important meaning with it.

As an exercise in analyzing style, choose two or more of the openings to these essays to compare, describing what each writing *style* communicates:

> *Beauty only skin deep*, your Japanese mother likes to say, and you wonder what she really means.
>
> Lee Ann Roripaugh, “Notes on Beauty”

> Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click. Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click.
>
> Kim Groninga, “Knot and Pull”

> My parents competed for their children’s love, measuring affection through our ethnic, religious, and consumer choices.
>
> Leila Christine Nadir, “Cold War”

> Though I usually only do it when he’s asleep or when I know we’re alone, my husband catches me licking our son from neck to chin.
>
> Traci Brimhall, “Philematophilia”

> In the beginning, there was Beauty. Beauty in the four directions.
>
> Wendy Gaudin, “Beauty”

> To describe the timpani part at the beginning of Strauss's *Zarathustra*, you could say doom doom doom doom doom doom doom, and then you'd probably sing up with the trumpet part, as if a twisted brass tube could escape fate.
>
> William Stobb, "Doom"

> Every artist, wrote Marcel Proust, is a native of an unknown country, which he himself has forgotten.
>
> Sofia Samatar, "The Unknown Country"

> The buildings of the Colony were like their history: sickly and diseased.
>
> Matthew Oglesby, "A Quiet Procedure"

Syntax

While you certainly don't need to study linguistics to become a good writer, knowing a bit about the scientific study of language offers a way to discuss differences in style. Linguistics is traditionally divided into five main branches: phonetics (the sounds of language), morphology (the formation of words), syntax (the formation of sentences), semantics (the meanings of words), and pragmatics (language in context). We may dip a toe into phonetics later, but for now, the most salient area of linguistics for our discussion of style is syntax. Knowing about the rules that govern how our language works will help you to make informed decisions in your writing. Remember, we're less interested in *prescriptive* grammatical rules than the *descriptive* rules we can observe by analyzing actual sentences from published essays.

Sentences can be placed into two general categories: hypotactic or paratactic. Don't worry about knowing these terms specifically. It's more important to become familiar with the actual differences in the styles that they define. Hypotactic style is characterized by subordination, in which some clauses are dependent on others to form a complete sentence. Hypotactic sentences include subordinating conjunctions (e.g., although, because, while, and so on). Paratactic style, on the other hand, is characterized by coordination, in which clauses are parallel and equivalent to one another. Paratactic sentences include coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, or, but, and so on).

Because its grammar relies on subordination, a hypotactic style tends to be more complicated, sometimes leading to what is referred to as a periodic sentence. Periodic sentences suspend the main idea or clause until the end. The complexity of the periodic sentence can be quite elegant, but because the hypotactic style asks a lot of the reader, it's sometimes difficult to comprehend at first glance. This style may come across as less conversational and more learned or considered. Here are two periodic sentences from Alyssa Pelish's essay "Something in the Woods: On Distance, Knowledge, and Enchantment":

> Here again are the "lofty oaks and lonely shadows in sacred groves" of the Romantic sublime—a scene which, when viewed from a safe position, can arouse in us "a sort of

> delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror" (as Edmund Burke puts it, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*).
>
> In his account, *The Maine Woods*—which, as a narrative, has no particular course other than the one Thoreau takes through the woods—he is all the time remarking on the vastness and denseness of the woods

In the first sentence, a dependent clause ("when viewed from a safe position") is embedded in another relative clause ("which…can arouse"), making it complicated indeed. The second example withholds the subject ("he") until nearly two-thirds of the way through the sentence. The tone of these two sentences is more like a critical essay, during which Pelish lays historical groundwork for a larger point she is trying to make.

The following periodic sentence from Sofia Samatar's "The Unknown Country" also suspends the main idea until the end:

> How to understand this intimacy, which must have been in place from the start, whole, like a process of cell division waiting to be unleashed, how to understand her love for Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, it's like trying to understand the origin of life itself, it's enough to make you overturn the projector.

Notice how many times this sentence interrupts one thought to add more depth and context to a key idea. Samatar still uses parallel structures through repetitions ("How to understand….how to understand," "it's like trying….it's enough"), but the prevalence of the dependent clauses makes this sentence more hypotactic than paratactic. The following example from Matthew Oglesby's "A Quiet Procedure" begins with two dependent clauses:

> Founded in 1910 and spanning more than a thousand acres in the rolling foothills overlooking Lynchburg, the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded was, for many years, a central landmark of the American eugenics movement, which stretched from the early 1900s until the late 1930s—and in some cases, beyond—with long lasting (and now mostly forgotten) consequences.

The periodic style often allows you to write long sentences that diverge from one bit of information to another, placing each idea into a precise relationship with another. The periodic sentence sometimes requires the reader to wait for a main idea, interrupting throughout. Notice how Oglesby, quite elegantly, adds nuance even after we've landed on the subject of the sentence. Periodic sentences don't have to be long, however. The following example, from Tyler Dunning's "Steel Reflections," may be easier to analyze:

> For the time being, when I pledge allegiance, it's to them, our national parks.

This sentence is much shorter than the ones above but still complex. Notice that we begin with an adverbial phrase, followed by a dependent clause. Even the main clause "it's to them"

withholds the main idea until the very end. To simplify this sentence ("I pledge allegiance to our national parks for the time being") would sacrifice its elegance as well as the rhetorical effect of ending on the key phrase "national parks." Compare Dunning's pithy sentence with a similarly structured but much longer one from Samantha Edmonds's essay (with a long title, too!), "An Incomplete List of Sad Beautiful Things that Almost but Don't Quite Manage to Make Clear to Me How Anyone Continues to Love Anything Knowing Someday It Will All Be Gone":

> For a moment, when I hold kittens small enough to fit on a single sheet of paper, or when I cry in the sleepy soft black of my perfectly healthy dalmatian's ears, or when on nights muggy and eternal (hopeful dear us) I miss my cigarette before I've even ashed it, I think I know too much to ever enjoy anything beautiful again.

In this luxurious sentence, after an initial adverbial phrase, Edmonds introduces three substantial dependent clauses before we reach the subject and main verb ("I think"). The effect here is one of searching for beauty before ending on a final sad resignation.

The other kind of syntax a sentence might have is parataxis. Because its grammar relies on parallelism, a paratactic sentence tends to be less complicated, leading to what is called a running style. A running style is usually easier to follow because it moves forward as item after item tumble forth, as though occurring to the writer in the midst of writing itself. Observe the grand paratactic opening of Wendy Gaudin's "Beauty":

> In the beginning, there was Beauty. Beauty in the four directions. Beauty in the frigid and pale north where the pelican and the egret blend into the glittery frost; Beauty in the scorched and dark south where turtles take their sweet time, stewing in the faithful heat, and alligators swirl in shiny hot waters; Beauty in the rising plenty of the east, wet with the dew of eternal early mornings, of baby whistling ducks and cackling geese forever in their fluffy, untested feathers; Beauty in the dry and aging west, as gray-haired red wolves say goodnight, goodnight. Beauty in the limitless singing sky and in the rust-colored soil, in the cantaloupe rays of the sun and in the winding spine of the country itself: in Mother Mississippi, the water that birthed us all.

The grammar of this long sentence is established quite simply: there was Beauty. The rest is an elaboration of where we find Beauty: north, south, easy, west, the sky, the soul, the sun, the country, the water. The grammar allows the sentence to go on forever naming the places where Beauty can be found. The effect is one of abundance and limitless accumulation. It's worth pointing out a common rhetorical device that holds this piece of writing together: anaphora. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences. In this case, the repetition of "Beauty in the," which then gives way at the end simply to "in the."

The paratactic or running style commonly takes the form of a series or list, as in this sentence from Sofia Samatar's "The Unknown Country":

> He collected old prints, marbles, dolls, crockery, soap-bubble sets.

Once more, the grammar is limitless and could go on forever, listing item after item after item, appropriate for a sentence about collecting things. Another notable rhetorical figure that you can observe in this sentence is the lack of an “and” before the final item in the list. This stylistic device, called asyndeton, suggests that the list is incomplete. If you added the “and,” the reader might have a sense that these items are the only things that he collected, as in this sentence from later in Samatar’s essay:

> Bessie Head loved winter mornings, rain, wildflowers, animals’ eyes, stars like polished blue jewels in the sky, three-legged iron cooking pots, sunrises, sunsets, Miriam Makeba, goats, and Albert Camus.

The effect is subtle, but the “and” appearing before “Albert Camus” makes the list seem final, and because the list is long and varied, the “and” lends a slightly humorous tone as well. The opposite of asyndeton is called polysyndeton, which occurs when more coordinating conjunctions than are grammatically necessary are included in a list. Compare the following two paratactic sentences from Lucienne Bloch’s essay “365 New Words a Year: October,” one employing asyndeton, the other polysyndeton:

> Solid ice creeps, grinds, shears, calves bergy bits, constantly deforming itself to maintain a balance between the pressure of accumulated snow and meltage.

> Stars and planets and galaxies winking in the dark skies are remote realities.

In the first example, the list of verbs lacks conjunctions altogether while in the second one they multiply. The effect of polysyndeton in the second sentence is debatable, but I sense a tone of excitement and wonder about the infinite expansiveness of the universe. At the very least you can hear a rhythm in the sentence that would not have been present if it had been punctuated conventionally: “Stars, planets, and galaxies….” In the following example of polysyndeton from Whitney Curry Wimbish’s “Bloodletting,” the effect is not excitement and wonder but something like panic as she suffers cramps:

> In time my body seemed to flush its entirety each day, a sensation like constant diarrhea, with cramps that came fast and sharp and unannounced.

Exercise: The Grammar of Style

Choose one or more of following excerpts and describe the writing as either hypotactic (periodic) or paratactic (running). Note asyndeton and/or polysyndeton, explaining what effect the syntax has on you as a reader. Then revise the sentence(s) to change the grammar from one style to another. What is the effect of changing the syntax?

In the desert's desiccating air, plants tell stories, pose riddles, with what they leave behind: saguaros with their ribs, wildflowers with their seeds, alligator junipers with their standing dead.

Maya Kapoor, "Memory Snags"

Then Lydia's voice stopped. I, too, fell silent. My face flushed. Lydia was counting, backwards, removing stitches from one of her needles. A handful of red yarn, unknitted, gathered next to her on the couch. The silence stood.

Kim Groninga, "Knot and Pull"

The pages of my address book have so many scratched-out names and phone numbers and addresses that it looks like an army of inky-footed chickens marched across them, saluting marriages, divorces, moves, job changes, shop closures, estrangements, disappearances, deaths.

Lucienne Bloch, "365 New Words a Year: October"

At twenty, the kiss and my speech about it was all arousal. The peck. The head tilt. The lean in. The smooch. The godawful hickey. The trail of kisses from collarbone to neck, from neck to breast, from breast to belly. The make-out. The Big Kahuna of kisses-the French.

Traci Brimhall, "Philematophilia"

We are enclosed in a feedback loop of what we cannot change, an identity neither chosen nor bought but historically received, your search history and your birth history and your family history amplified and streamed back to you ever faster, bigger, simpler, more entrenched.

Sofia Samatar, "The Unknown Country"

Out the window is a different scene of patchwork development from above, roads and rivers and farmland and subdivided habitat.

Tyler Dunning, "Steel Reflections"

He considered the primer burn rates, the grains and blends of powder, the length of the wad.

Andrew Jones, "Recipe for Reloading"

You gain the dead-mother weight of ice cream and chocolate candy and bags of chips—an apple, like your mother.

Jennifer Gravley, "Proposing a World without a Mother: Grief and Creative Nonfiction as a Sense-Making Tool

Here is the smell of stomach acid, sweet and rotten. Here is the interior, exposed. Here is blood and shit and mucous, deposited into a bag worn at the waist.

Whitney Curry Wimbish, "Bloodletting"

Show and Tell

Other chapters in this textbook discuss the difference between showing and telling in your writing, challenging the traditional creative writing advice, “Show, don’t tell.” I want to offer another way to analyze and understand showing and telling by describing three different modes of writing: dramatic, narrative, and lyrical. To be clear, there are many other ways that you might categorize different storytelling modes. (In fact, the classical categories would be called the dramatic, lyric, and epic modes.) I have found, however, that these three are more suited to the contemporary context and simple enough to be helpful as you read, write, and revise creative prose.

The dramatic mode does not imply that you’re writing about something important or sensational. Drama here simply means that things are happening. I like to frame the dramatic mode as a kind of stage where action is taking place. A description of this action, even if it’s only the setting, indicates we are in the dramatic mode. This mode, therefore, is equivalent to *showing* the action of a *scene*. Importantly, in the dramatic mode, we exist more or less in real time.

In the narrative mode, the writer is telling the reader *about* things rather than showing them happening. The narrative offers information and context. It summarizes rather than lingering in a scene. This mode, therefore, is equivalent to *telling*. While the dramatic mode happens in what feels like real time, in the narrative mode you can move as quickly through time as you like, jumping back and forth as necessary to orient your reader.

The lyrical mode can be employed in your writing at any time, within either the dramatic or narrative modes themselves. Quite simply, you are writing in the lyrical mode when you are paying close attention to the sound of language. In fact, almost all contemporary poetry is called lyrical because in addition to rendering images and communicating information, a poem is interested in creating an auditory artifact. If the dramatic shows and the narrative tells, the lyrical *sings*. It sometimes has the effect of slowing time down, often because the attention to the music of language might accompany meticulous description, either within the action of dramatic scene or perhaps a narrative account of one’s inner state. In the lyrical mode, in fact, you can pause time altogether and stay forever in a single moment.

The key to understanding modes is that you’re rarely ever going to stay completely in one mode or the other. Good writing shifts modes according to what is needed at that moment. The following remarkable passage from the opening of Brandon Schrand’s “The End of Something” is a virtuoso performance of shifting between modes:

> On the second night, the crew rolled in a bank of floodlights to blaze the shoreline, and another high beam to sweep the dark surface of Alexander Reservoir, the large caterpillar-shaped body of water at the edge of Soda Springs, Idaho, my hometown. It was July 1989, I was sixteen going on seventeen, and, like everyone else in town, I had been upended by the story. Chad and I were watching from his truck at the reservoir’s

> edge on the opposite side of the action, smoking Marlboros and listening to Rock 103 out of Salt Lake City on low volume. The sky was an obsidian dome and you could only see the stars and moon in the intervals between the sweeping high beams bright on the black water. Search boats trolled back and forth with their throaty motors churning in the deep dark. Crackly radio chatter carried across the water as if transmitted from another time. Farther down the shoreline, dogs barked in the damp distance and we could see flashlights wiggle in the dark. Lured by the spectacle, trout broke the water's surface, trying to feed on the lights and the moon.

Almost the entire passage is in the dramatic mode, but it shifts quickly to provide context with "It was July 1989…." Though subtle, you quickly realize that the writer is also slipping into the lyrical mode with his descriptions. Listen to the music of the sentence, "Search boats trolled back and forth with their throaty motors churning in the deep dark." Can you hear the consistent off-rhymes (boats trolled, throaty motors), not to mention the consonance with the repeated /t/ and /th/ sounds? Can you hear the insistence of the rhythm pounding, beginning with two hard stresses ("Search boats") and ending with two hard stresses ("deep dark")? In the analysis of meter in poetry, these double stresses are called spondees. I don't think Schrand is consciously thinking about poetic meter as he is writing, but I am absolutely certain that he listening very carefully to the musical effect of his prose.

Here is another example from Maya Kapoor's "Memory Snags" of shifting gracefully from one mode to the other while also incorporating the lyrical mode:

> I expect to find a bird's nest in the hollow of the snag. Instead I find a pile of rusty nails and a thumb-sized plastic skull that grins at me when I pick it up. Hidden arthropods moan, buzz, creak against the backdrop of distant traffic's shush and flow, shush and flow.
>
> I move every few years for work, school, connection. I don't have an intimate read on this landscape, a deep knowledge of this place. I could easily pass through the Sonoran Desert and its mountains with no clear sense of ecology or of history. But thousands of alligator juniper snags like this one dot these hillsides, bleached and splintered, memorializing the changing climate of the Southwest. In the Santa Catalinas, memory snags gather time in their broken fingers for me to see.

Rather than shifting back and forth as Schrand does, Kapoor begins in the dramatic mode then shifts to the narrative mode, where she stays. At first, we are in a scene in which she is looking for a nest but find nails and a skull, hearing bugs against the sound of traffic as she slips into the lyrical mode. The next paragraph gives us necessary information about her life, but you can also hear the the music of the liquid /l/ sounds (alligator, hillsides, bleached, splintered, memorializing, climate).

Modes are not always so straightforward. Sometimes a piece of writing may straddle (dramatic) scene and (narrative) summary, creating what is called a half-scene. Take the following sentence from Traci Brimhall, for instance:

> My son has also started to kiss, or so I assume that's what he's doing when he opens his mouth and plants a wet circle on my cheekbone, his imitation still unsure of itself, the orbicularis oris still too weak or unpracticed to offer the chaste exchange of affection.

While this passage hangs out in the narrative mode, telling the reader information about Brimhall's infant son, we get the flavor of the dramatic mode by offering specific actions that occurred in the past. She covers a lot of ground by summarizing, but the reader still gets the imagery of him opening his mouth and the wet circle on her cheekbone.

Gabriella Souza's essay "Connection" hovers almost entirely between scenes and half-scenes as she gives the reader a lot of information while offering quick snippets of scenes:

> A man on my flight is named Gabriel; I am Gabriella. As we wait in a Mexico City airport terminal, he tells me that in his dream two nights before he conjured an earthquake. His sister from Oaxaca called to tell him how it rattled the ceiling, shook the glasses to the floor. "These things always happen," he tells me. "In my dreams, people die, then the next day, it comes true.

The point of focusing on these different modes is to demonstrate that in addition to managing your reader's sense of space and appealing to their senses, you also control their experience of time. If you are writing something that feels like it lingers too long in narrative summary, try including some half-scenes to offer the reader some imagery. Conversely, if you find yourself stuck in a scene, try reducing it to a half-scene in order to move forward.

CHAPTER SIX

Figurative Language

"What makes us human?" asks Lance Larsen in one of his "Aphorisms for a Lonely Planet." "Metaphor, the opposable thumb of thought," he answers, aptly enough, with a metaphor. You've likely encountered the term *metaphor* in an English class at some point in your life, and you may recall that a metaphor is a comparison of two different things, using the terms of one of those things to understand the other. In the example above, Larsen shows how, just like the opposable thumb, other animals don't have the benefit of thinking metaphorically, which explains to some extent the evolution of human cognition and intelligence. In fact, you could argue that all human language is at its heart metaphorical and therefore fundamental to how we know anything at all. Even if you're familiar with the concept of the metaphor, you might not have considered how basic it is to the way we think and understand the world around us.

Linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson make this case in their classic 1980 book *Metaphors We Live By*. They point out some very basic and common metaphors that inform how we live our lives. For instance, time is money. How is time like money? Lakoff and Johnson explain that in our culture, time is considered a limited resource and a valuable commodity. We can therefore *waste* time, or *spend* time. We think about *saving* time or *budgeting* time. All of these verbs (waste, spend, save, budget) are not literal. They are metaphors. Time is not actually something that can be wasted, spent, saved, or budgeted.

The point here is that metaphor comes naturally to humans. Our cultures create and spread them without our having to think about doing so at all. Metaphor is a completely natural linguistic phenomenon. Artists, however, take advantage of this instinct by creating *new* metaphors, ones that are not common or familiar. In fact, the fundamental metaphors of our culture like time is money have already slipped into cliche and are less likely to be helpful to a creative writer. Recall my earlier idea about the function of art helping us to see the world anew. That's what a fresh metaphor can do: show us a connection or likeness between two things that no one has ever noticed before, possibly revealing some truth about reality itself—or at least our perception of it. An original, artful metaphor can astonish your reader.

Closely related to metaphor is *simile*, which is also a comparison between two things. The main difference is that a simile lays bare the comparison by including the word *like* or *as*. The effects, however, are somewhat different. That is, a metaphor integrates the reality of the comparison into the language itself whereas a simile remains indirect, relying on language to hold the comparison at arm's length. One is not better or more useful than the other, but in my experience metaphors can be more transformative and therefore more difficult to render. The simile is only a matter of placing two things that share a characteristic next to one another and tucking the word *like* or *as* into the phrase. The metaphor *asserts* while the simile *suggests*. Even so, as you develop your own figurative language, you will need to decide what effect you'd like to have on your reader. Sometimes a quick simile is enough to give your reader a sense of

what you want to communicate. As always, you will need to let context determine what kind of figurative language works best in your writing.

Finally, as opposed to *metaphor* and *simile*, both of which compare two different things, directly or indirectly, a *symbol* is a concrete image that stands in for a larger idea. Like metaphor, symbolism is also a very natural human invention. You are already familiar with many traditional symbols. Why is it so that you know immediately what the following birds represent: the dove, the owl, the eagle, the raven. You didn't have to think too hard to come up with peace, wisdom, freedom, and death. Like metaphors, symbols are also culture-bound. Doves represent peace in the Abrahamic religions but not in Buddhism. The eagle clearly represents freedom in the United States but not necessarily in Mexico. The symbols you may want to develop will need to diverge from these familiar cultural images, but they will be specific to the context you create in your writing. A rose does not have to represent love in your essay. Similar to metaphor, a symbol can be challenging to create because it is deeply integrated into your writing rather than indirectly suggestive of meaning as similes are. The actual significance of a symbol often remains unstated, allowing your reader to come to their own understanding of what is being represented. Don't get too caught up in trying to cobble together a rich symbol in your writing. I would argue that the best literary symbolism is discovered rather than imposed. The key is to be alert to the objects, the things, the stuff you observe in your writing, asking yourself if and how they carry deeper meanings. Symbols conjure the the old verities and truths of the heart, the big ideas and experiences of the human condition. They are powerful precisely because we imbue them with this magic.

Let's look at some examples of figurative language in context. Maya Kapoor's "Memory Snags" announces its symbolism in its very title, demonstrating how the juniper snags in Arizona are more than just dead trees. Kapoor employs both metaphor and simile as she develops the snags as a symbol: "The alligator juniper grew thick, stretching perhaps twenty feet tall. Its bark scaled like the skin of an old reptile." It's not a huge leap to conceptualize the bark of a tree as the skin of an animal, but the comparison deepens as the essay continues: "Its gray surface, which appeared knobbed and cracked from far away, is finely grooved all over in thin repeating lines and delicate swirls like fingertips." The skin is rendered more specifically as the image appeals to our sense of sight while inviting us to imagine touching the tree with our own fingertips. Eventually, the snags are presented metaphorically: "In the Santa Catalinas, memory snags gather time in their broken fingers for me to see." From skin, to fingertips, to fingers, the image of these dead trees accrue more significance as we continue reading until we understand more clearly their profound symbolic meaning at the end:

> But I search for the standing dead on which to snag my memory, to tack the truth in place. Standing dead alligator junipers in the Santa Catalina Mountains help me keep track of a quickly changing world. They are the stories that I wish I knew better, that I wish I knew better how to tell—about climate change; about what's happened and what's coming next; about cause and effect; tree and sky; memory and mountain; time and place. I don't want to look away.

The trees have become ghostly relics of the past, markers of climate change, uneasy reminders of our limited human understanding of the world around us. Remarkably, Kapoor achieves this depth in her writing in only two pages.

Another brief essay that develops striking, multifaceted images through figurative language is "Skinwalk," in which Brooke Wonders remembers the body of her dead ex-boyfriend, much of which, as the title suggests, focuses on skin:

> Us freshly scrubbed, me lying next to him, breathing near his neck, his skin smelled like the wind that whirled past my face when we went mountain biking together—evergreen forest, mountain air, neurotic clean living.

In this case, the comparison collapses time, transporting the reader into a quick image that suggests a previous scene. Inspired by the mythology of the Native American skinwalker, the essay culminates in a complex figure in which the symbolic meaning of skin goes both ways: "Our memories wear us, and we wear them, brittle and transparent as onionskin." Skin carries the past, through scars and tattoos, but the past can also possess us, haunt us, wear our skin.

Figurative language doesn't always have to lead to larger symbolism. Sometimes, writers use similes or metaphors as a means of characterization, as this metaphor from Lee Ann Roripaugh's "Notes on Beauty": "Your mother wants a peacock, not a defective pigeon." We get a sense of both the narrator and her mother, whose cruel treatment is demonstrated throughout the essay: "Finally, she will sometimes throw a few pieces of food into the back seat at you, as if you were a dog." Roripaugh doesn't dwell on either of these comparisons (pigeon, dog), but each instance helps us understand this relationship. Eventually, a more complex figure emerges:

> You wear your social armor as a shell to avoid mollusk-without-a-shelliness. As a kind of prosthetic to insure basic functionality. A smooth, protective shellac to keep woundedness from the open air. A smooth, protective shellac to keep out bacteria, grit, and dirt from what's raw.

The mollusk metaphor neatly captures the writer's need to protect herself after suffering the harsh judgment from her mother over time. Figurative language is also an effective way to establish tone, as in Matthew Oglesby's "A Quiet Procedure," which opens on a "sickly and diseased" image: "Latticework peeled away to reveal the gray gaps of crawlspaces like missing teeth." Everything in the Colony is in disrepair: "Wind whistled in the cracked walls and broken windows where tattered curtains hung like ghosts." The overall effect is eerie. It's not surprising that Oglesby uses haunted imagery more than once, calling the place a "ghost town," and imagining the old superintendent "standing in a window like a ghost in repose."

Finally, let's take a look at some examples of personification, which occurs when you attribute human qualities to a non-human entity. Personification is inherently metaphorical because it compares non-humans to humans, as in Brandon Schrand's "The End of Something": "Every

now and then, however, when the breeze blew just so, the scent of fishrot would steal up like the briefest of phantoms and rob me of my breath." In this case, the breeze is being compared to a something that can "steal up," as though it had human-like intentions. In "Confluence," Taylor Brorby similarly personifies rivers: "If you lie down at the Confluence, silt your belly, legs, and arms, push yourself out to the point like a turtle and submerge your head, you can hear the Yellowstone speak in one ear and the Missouri whisper in the other." These rivers are not actually, speaking, of course, but the metaphor allows Brorby to expand the image of the confluence into a more complex symbol of our human instinct for storytelling, which then "serves as the best framework to understand myself."

Here's a tip: notice how all of these instances of personification rely on verbs to carry most of the comparison: steal up, speak, whisper, wear. We might assume that figurative language is all about the nouns, like the breeze or a river, because those are the *things* we are comparing. Instead, some of the richest personification (and metaphors in general) are a function of elegantly chosen verbs. Verbs naturally carry meanings from certain domains whose metaphorical resonance you can take advantage of.

Exercise: Metaphorical Thinking

Developing interesting figurative language is not just surface-level ornamentation. If nothing else, I hope this chapter has convinced you that it goes much deeper than that. When metaphors, similes, or symbols appear in your writing, they should derive from some truth about how you perceive the world around you. Like all good art, figurative language itself has the capacity to reveal something we hadn't realized or understood before. To that end, this playful exercise is meant to jog your thinking a little so that you're not thinking too logically.

Make a list of ten concrete nouns, no abstractions. The nouns should be things in the world that have physical properties. Try to include a variety of nouns from different domains. Don't list ten fruits. Now make a separate list of ten active verbs, again no abstractions. The verbs should indicate actions that we can observe in the physical world. Finally, make another separate list of prepositional phrases. Don't think too hard about doing this exercise right. You can always revise later if needed. Now, select a body part (hand, heart, head, arms, legs, back, foot, ear, tongue) and mix and match words to create sentences from the list of nouns, verbs, and prepositional phrases:

> My (<u>body part</u>) is a (<u>noun</u>) that (<u>verb</u>) (<u>prepositional phrase</u>).

Experiment with different combinations, adapt the syntax as needed to create coherent sentences, and try to discover some kernel of truth you hadn't thought of before. Feel free to add further parts of speech, too. Share your sentences with others and discuss the possibilities for integrating it (or the idea it contains) into a larger piece of writing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Imagery and the Senses

You may be familiar with the common creative writing adage: *show don't tell*. This bit of advice has been repeated so often that it seems to have become a unquestioned truth. In the fiction chapter of this book, you have learned a lot about developing *narrative telling*, which often gets short shrift when we talk about what makes good writing. We want to complicate that notion of showing always being preferable to telling. In other words, *showing* and *telling* are each techniques that you can choose to employ or not. They represent neither good nor bad writing. Rather, the context of your particular piece of writing will determine if, when, and how you might call upon them.

Let me make a case for showing as an indispensable writing technique, whether you're working in fiction, nonfiction, or poetry. I'm focusing on it here because the word *nonfiction* will inevitably carry certain connotations in your mind. You may think that nonfiction is academic, stuffy, boring. I hope that I've demonstrated in the first chapter the difference between *that* kind of nonfiction and the kind of *creative* nonfiction you're working on in this class.

Showing is another way to talk about the inclusion of images in your writing. Images are not only visual. They include all five senses. The reason sensory images work so well in creative writing is that we experience the world through our bodies. Humans are embodied creatures. We have minds, through which we also *think* about the world. We cogitate as intellectual beings, but our primary experience of the world comes to us through the body, through our skin, our ears, our nose, our tongue, our eyes. These sensory organs are the only way that the world enters us, contributing to our inner psychic lives. Even our emotions are influenced by chemicals in our brains and bodies. We don't *think* our emotions, after all. We *feel* them, viscerally and immediately inside our bodies.

The goal of creative writing is not primarily to convince a reader of some abstract argument as you might wish to do in other, critical modes of writing. Embedded in a piece of creative writing might be an idea that you wish to convey, but the means to do so is not necessarily logic or persuasion. Rather, the goal of creative writing is to offer your reader an experience, some of which may indeed include ideas and arguments but will always attempt to animate them through experience. The job of the writer of creative nonfiction, then, is to learn to translate an experience of the world into the language of the senses. What's more, I resist the easy (and I would argue harmful) division between the mind and the body, the intellect and the senses, reason and emotion. As a writer, you don't need to privilege one over the other because when you take either of them seriously, you must necessarily contend with the other. Severing body from mind distorts and does violence to the human condition. In other words, to write convincingly about the body is another way to get at the interior experience of consciousness itself.

Rendering the sensory world into language is not a matter of decoration. Images can be pleasing and beautiful by themselves. Perhaps that is enough sometimes. But then, perhaps not. I believe that images function in creative writing in a much more elemental way, appealing to the grounded, embodied experiences we have as human beings. Dazzling the reader with pretty sentences and gratuitous imagery may be entertaining, but I will always be left asking: to what end? Instead of thinking of imagery as decoration, then, I would urge you to consider the manifold functions of images, including the following:

- Images can offer an accurate representation of the world you want to evoke.
- Images can reveal something of the consciousness or personality of the observer.
- Images can establish a tone in your writing, putting your reader in a specific mood.
- Images can advance the plot or complicate the narrative in your writing.
- Images can serve as symbols that suggest larger thematic significance.

Exercise: Sensory Filters

Here's a writing tip: in order to render sensory experiences as directly as possible, avoid the sense words themselves if you can. I call these *sensory filters*. Compare, for instance, the following two sentences:

> I saw the flag whipping in the wind.
> The flag whipped in the wind.

In the first sentence, the main verb is "saw," meaning that the act of seeing is the most important action. The second sentence renders the action of the flag much more directly. If the goal is to focus on the flag, the second sentence is preferable. On the other hand, if you're writing about regaining your vision, perhaps the act of seeing is more important and should be emphasized. The point I want to make here is that sensory filters are extremely common in first drafts. It will be important to locate them and make a decision about whether they're important or not. Just because it would be hard to revise doesn't mean you should let it stand, which is good advice in any writing context. The pleasure of revision lies in finding elegant solutions to problems like these. Read the sentences below and ask yourself how you would revise them to remove the sensory filters. In some cases, it's more than just a matter of rearranging words. Be as radical in your revision as you like. Sometimes, you will have to add entirely new words to make a complete sentence or offer important context.

> I heard the chickens in the backyard.
>
> I smelled the manure as we drove down the highway.
>
> I saw him running up the escalator.
>
> I felt the spongy texture of the cake.

I tasted the bitterness of the aspirin.

Here's a writing tip: sensory filters are similar to the concept of what I call *cognitive filters*, in which a writer includes sometimes unnecessary phrases like *I think* and *I believe.* Usually, these filters can be removed as well, making the thought process much more immediate to the reader. On the other hand, the same test applies here: if the *thinking* or *believing* is the important action in the context of what you're writing, that likely means you need to keep the filter. Regardless, you should be alert to the prevalence of such filters and become accustomed to revising accordingly.

Smell

In an early scene of the 1984 movie *Ghostbusters*, three paranormal investigators are gathering clues at a library after reports of supernatural disturbances. At one point, the character played by the actor Dan Ackroyd says, "Listen! Do you smell something?" It's a silly, subtle little joke that might go unnoticed altogether—or only elicit a polite chuckle. Why should you have to *listen* in order detect a *smell*? Well, it might only be a joke, but something about it also rings true to my lived experience. Smell is the most elusive of the senses to capture on the page. When trying to locate or identify an unfamiliar odor in the air, you often need to remove or suppress other sensory input in order to focus on the olfactory.

Smell is also notoriously difficult to render on the page without resorting to the word *smell* itself, or its equivalent like *scent* or *odor*. For instance, in the sensory filter example above, how are you supposed to describe smelling manure while driving down the highway without saying *smell*? Sometimes, the virtue of the direct description of a sensory experience must give way to the limits of our language. Don't give up on smell, however, as a powerful sense in your writing. To my mind, it is one of the senses that is deeply connected to memory. Samantha Edmond has this experience in her essay "An Incomplete List of Sad Beautiful Things that Almost but Don't Quite Manage to Make Clear to Me How Anyone Continues to Love Anything Knowing Someday It Will All Be Gone." She is immediately transported to the past through smell: "The smell, raw and wet, of uncooked fish—inhale and I am five years old, knife in hand, thumb in gaping crappie mouth." In my own experience, to this day, there is a smell in the air at a certain time in the spring when I sense that it's time to start playing baseball. Now, I haven't played baseball for thirty years, but I remember it in my body. I can very easily go back to that time in my memory when I smell the ground itself begin to exhale something ancient and bacterial into the air.

Freewriting questions

What smells evoke memory most strongly to you? What smells do you recall from your childhood? What is the most or least appealing smell to you and why?

Taste

Similar to smell, taste can be elusive and difficult to write about without resorting to the sensory filter. You may also be tempted to describe taste in tired, familiar, or cliche ways. For instance, you likely want to avoid writing something *dancing* on your tongue, or that there is *a party* in your mouth. You're a writer, not auditioning for the Food Network. So, too, will it be hard to keep from writing as though you're a marketer or advertiser. Apples might be crisp and juicy and sweet, but it does little to help me experience eating an actual apple since those words are so often used in commercial contexts. When Barbara Haas tastes a Pearl of Inkerman wine in her essay "Like Losing Three Sardinias," she describes the experience in both concrete and abstract terms, presenting a complicated, compelling experience: "Pearl of Inkerman hit the tongue with a splash of glistening wet-stone minerality," she writes. Later, she notes that "With even that first sip, as Pearl of Inkerman rolled across my tongue and its grassy astringent notes registered, I felt the intimacy. This was a substantial mouthful, earthy, unpretentious, integrated." It's hard to get more concrete than "glistening wet-stone minerality" and "grassy astringent," but then she feels "intimacy," something that is "unpretentious, integrated."

Freewriting questions

How would you describe your favorite food? How would you describe your *least* favorite food? What kind of abstract ideas do you think would offer a complicated but compelling sensory experience of one of these foods?

Touch

Describing the sensation of touch can be challenging because it manifests in many different ways. It can be an encompassing feeling all over your skin, or it can be localized on your fingertips: cold, hot, rough, smooth, hard, soft. In his essay "On Fire," Paul Crenshaw describes a childhood memory of fires igniting in the summer near Fort Chaffee: "Afterward the land lay scorched, the grass blackened and burned. Ash fell like snow. Trees smoldered for days. The heat lingered in the earth, rising like radiation." Later, as a teenager, he watches a house fire: "Even across the street we could feel the fierce heat of the fire. The night turned damp with steam." In both cases, he evokes many senses at once, including touch, creating a mood in the reader of danger and foreboding. Compare these descriptions of heat to Neil Mathison's essay "Ice." Describing camping on Mt. Rainier, he writes, "We had merely to pull our caps over our eyes and let our senses float out—to the sounds, to the breezes, to the cold-to-the-touch-and-ice-sculpted rock. Then we envisioned an icier day, a millennia of ice, an age of ice." Later, he remembers a childhood memory of boating on Puget Sound the day that John F. Kennedy was killed: "The day was cold and gray. We felt as if the assassination had irreversibly chilled everything. On that day, it was easy to imagine what it had been like when the ice was here: cold and bleak and shaping, only this time, on this day, what was being shaped was us." In both of these cases, Mathison's attention to the cold prompts moments of speculation and imagination.

Freewriting questions

What is the hottest or coldest you have ever been? How would you describe a texture that you love or hate to touch? How would you describe what you are touching right now?

Sound

Unlike taste, smell, and touch, our sense of hearing comes much more readily to mind when we try to describe the world around us. The beauty of rendering sound imagery in your writing is that language itself evokes sound, appealing to our inner ear as we imagine words being spoken out loud, so when you describe an auditory experience, you are also creating a new one. Some of the most beautiful and artful writing is arranged so that these two experiences echo or reinforce one another. For instance, in a description of a river, if you choose words that are lulling, liquid, and lazy, the imagery becomes calming and serene. If you choose words that are gushing, rushing, whooshing, however, the imagery becomes exciting and possibly dangerous. This formal technique is based on a phenomenon called *sound symbolism*. In English, there are certain clusters of sounds that evoke different domains of meaning. For instance, words that begin with *gl-* often suggest something to do with light or vision: *glance*, *glare*, *glimmer*, *glisten*, *glint*, and so on. A famous linguistic experiment asks people from many language backgrounds to give one of two names, *bouba* or *kiki*, to two different shapes, one sharp and jagged, the other round and curvy. Naturally, we associate *kiki* with the first shape and *bouba* with the second. As writers, we can occasionally take advantage of this phenomenon. Sometimes, sounds naturally suggest themselves by the activity taking place in your writing. Kim Groninga's "Knot and Pull" opens with such a scene: "Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click. Knit. Click click. Purl two. Click click. When the tiny metal tapping grew louder than Lydia's voice, I knew I needed to pull back to my larger surroundings, settle into my whole self." The author is interviewing a woman about a school she had founded in Jerusalem for blind adults. Aptly, sound imagery becomes as important as visual imagery as Groninga returns to the sounds of knitting, weaving it through the scene to create an ambient background of sound.

Freewriting questions

What sounds are you hearing around you right now? What different ways can you describe them? How do these different ways suggest different meanings? What sounds do you enjoy? What sounds annoy or frighten you? What sounds are intriguing or mysterious?

Sight

Through sight we know and understand the world. Because vision is our primary sense, it is ubiquitous in our language and therefore in our writing. Brandon Schrand masterfully renders the visual world in his essay "The End of Something." Let's take a long look at the opening:

> On the second night, the crew rolled in a bank of floodlights to blaze the shoreline, and another high beam to sweep the dark surface of Alexander Reservoir, the large caterpillar-shaped body of water at the edge of Soda Springs, Idaho, my hometown. It was July 1989, I was sixteen going on seventeen, and, like everyone else in town, I had

> been upended by the story. Chad and I were watching from his truck at the reservoir's edge on the opposite side of the action, smoking Marlboros and listening to Rock 103 out of Salt Lake City on low volume. The sky was an obsidian dome and you could only see the stars and moon in the intervals between the sweeping high beams bright on the black water. Search boats trolled back and forth with their throaty motors churning in the deep dark. Crackly radio chatter carried across the water as if transmitted from another time. Farther down the shoreline, dogs barked in the damp distance and we could see flashlights wiggle in the dark. Lured by the spectacle, trout broke the water's surface, trying to feed on the lights and the moon.

First, notice that Schrand does not linger solely on the visual. Like all good writers, he appeals to multiple senses, including the sound of "throaty motors" and "crackly radio chatter." However, the visual imagery is vivid and specific. Alongside the two characters in the scene, we watch the play between light and dark, from the stars and moon in the dark sky, to the light beams scanning the dark water, to the distant flashlights in the dark. Like the fish, it's as though the reader, too, is "trying to feed on the lights and the moon." The visual will likely come more naturally to you as a writer, but you should still try to craft your imagery so that it creates artful effects as in "The End of Something."

Freewriting questions

What are you seeing at this moment? What are its most and least obvious visual characteristics? How can you describe a familiar visual image in fresh and unusual ways? What pairs of visual adjectives like light and dark can you play with in your own writing?

Synaesthesia

I've purposely ordered the discussion of senses in this part of the chapter from the most to the least difficult to incorporate into your writing, smell being notoriously challenging, sight seeming more or less automatic. To finish off this section, I'd like to introduce you to an extremely valuable literary device: synaesthesia. Synaesthesia occurs when you craft a specific sensory image by using the language associated with a different sense, as when you render a visual image in auditory terms, or render an image of taste by choosing tactile words. For example, "Her whisper glimmered softly in his ear." A whisper is something we *hear*, but in this sentence it glimmers, which is a *visual* verb. Or, "The wine lulled like a shush on his tongue." Here, the *taste* of wine is rendered as an *auditory* phenomenon with the word "shush" (and, arguably, the verb "lull" here evokes the word "lullaby.") You might not even notice the subtle effects of synaesthesia, but it can be truly memorable.

Alison Alstrom's "Good Morning, Heartache" dips into synaesthesia as she ends the essay with a musical performance: "My father counts to two, then three. He lifts his saxophone. Horns swell up like waves, glints of keyboard sunlight bounce off and through them. Swishy brushes on the drums are like seaweed fingers, softly stroking. Bass notes are smooth, sturdy stones along the

bottom.” Music becomes visual and tactile, opening an evocative oceanic metaphor that may have otherwise remained closed.

While synaesthesia is a literary device, it is also an actual neurological condition. Laura Legge recounts this experience in her essay “Deep Purple,” explaining a specific form of synesthesia she has called “chromesthesia, in which many pieces of music I hear are twinned with distinct visual experiences,” as her description of listening to a song by Prince demonstrates:

> I was a candle in a cross-breeze. My self was flickering. Beyond the physical sensation, I could actually see the smoke coils. It was my first time witnessing a song expand beyond its own auditory build. Everything changed. I was newly aware that poetry could sunburn me. On a spiritual level, I knew a drum kit could break my neck.

Once more, synaesthesia allows for the emergence of an energetic and compelling metaphor: music as fire. Legge makes clear that synaesthesia is a uniquely transformative mode of writing worth integrating into your own work.

Freewriting questions

Has music ever had a physical effect on your body? How would you describe a common sensory experience without using words associated with that sense? Can you describe toothpaste in your mouth without invoking taste? A symphony without sound? Perfume without smell? The sun, stars, or moon without sight? A pinprick without touch?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Writing the Body

As I hope the previous chapter made clear, sensory images are fundamental to creative writing because one of the primary ways we experience the world is through our bodies. Whether you like it or not, as a human, you are an inescapably embodied creature. By attending to the body and learning what lessons it might have to teach us, we can arrive at an even deeper understanding of our interior lives, the world of ideas, emotion, and psychology. In this chapter, before discussing four different essays as case studies, I'd like to acknowledge that it's natural to feel an initial resistance to writing about your own body, but as I hope each of the following examples demonstrates, doing so can lead to powerful and insightful writing.

The Illness Memoir

Whitney Curry Wimbish's "Bloodletting" gets the reader's attention immediately: "I started shitting blood when I was 12. It began slowly, just a few red watercolor drops in the toilet water. Soon it was a flood." By disclosing what is ordinarily not talked about in polite company, Wimbish makes clear that her essay will be vulnerable, honest, raw. Later, she acknowledges the internal censor that must be overcome to write such an essay: "You're shitting blood, you say? That's gross. Don't be gross." Art requires, however, that we risk being "gross" by confronting the common reality of our lived lives, including "shit" and other bodily functions. "To deny [shit]," she writes, "is to deny humanity, real humanity, not the ultra-sanitized neat-and-tidy American version that is the biggest fantasy of them all. To deny it is to deny reality." Being "gross" for the sake of being gross, of course, might just be gratuitous and uninteresting, but admitting that the human body is "a slimy unruly mess of shit, blood, guts, fibers, bone, mucosa, ligaments" can lead to truths we need to hear.

As readers, we sympathize with the writer's suffering, worrying about what is causing her bleeding, but that is only part of what the essay is about. Wimbish does not hold anything back, leaning into the confessional mode, revealing that her father sometimes spent time "fucking our neighbor, the one with the drunk husband," and her mother would go into a rage in her pottery studio. Eventually, "Dad tried to strangle her and she left," leading to Wimbish's "big alone," during which she "considered…blowing my brains out." This troubled familial context allows us to understand the narrator as a person dealing with more than just ulcerative colitis; she is dealing with emotional and psychological trauma as well.

This essay dares you to look away as the aftermath of a surgery to remove Wimbish's large intestines is described:

> Here is the smell of stomach acid, sweet and rotten. Here is the interior, exposed. Here is blood and shit and mucous, deposited into a bag worn at the waist. Here are the two halves of the body, precariously held together by thirty-two staples. My skin strains at the edges of the metal spikes like it wants to burst.

We are drawn to and repelled by such vivid writing as we are compelled to imagine not just the author's body but our own. Wimbish recounts experiences in her youth when she would hide her condition from others, which leads her to "carry a hiding place inside" herself. "Bloodletting" is a memoir about illness, but like all great art, it takes on much more than that, too. It's an essay about physical pain and suffering but also about the shame and fear of humiliation we all experience at one point in our lives. There is a lesson here for artists as well. As writers, Wimbish reminds us, we have a choice in our work: "Return to safety. Write about anything other than yourself. Hide." Or you can dare to confront the truth of your embodied self—and then tell it.

Freewriting Prompt

Write about a time you were sick, describing as many of the physical sensations you can remember and connecting this experience to an interior emotional or psychological state.

Body Image

Lee Ann Roripaugh's "Notes on Beauty" tells the origin story of the author "never being able to feel comfortable in your own skin, your own body." Her body image is shaped by years of her mother and father's constant criticisms, namely regarding her weight. Once again, this essay focuses on her own personal experiences in and of her body, but it is also about the development of an emotional trauma. When her mother complains about her five-year-old daughter's ballet dancing, wanting "a peacock, not a defective pigeon," the woman threatens "to *throw you away*." Roripaugh learns "to peacock for love. Of course, it was never enough. Of course, you were never enough. Of course, you still so often feel as if you will never be enough." Her body is the site for this feeling of inadequacy both in memory and as part of her deeply embedded psychology in the present.

One notable stylistic feature in this essay is the author's decision to use the second-person *you* rather than first-person *I*. The second person is notoriously difficult to pull off successfully in a piece of literary writing. Even though we use the second person in our everyday conversation quite frequently to tell stories about ourselves, it can nevertheless seem unnatural or come across as a gimmick if you use it without a good reason. In this case, not only does Roripaugh's masterful writing carry the essay, but the second person enhances the sense of detachment when it comes to her body image. What's more, the end of the essay makes clear that *you* is a complicated pronoun in this context:

> More and more, as you get older, you recognize physical aspects of your mother in yourself: the dimpled hands with creased-pillow knuckles, a resting downturned mouth over an overbite, the smattering of freckles in a raccoon's-mask pattern when you've gotten too much sun, the mismatched eyebrows, a brown age spot on the lower left cheek near the jawbone, the high but crooked Horikoshi cheekbones.

The author is describing her own body (hands, mouth, freckles, eyebrows, age spot, cheekbones), but she is also describing her mother's, such that you can imagine the essay being addressed to an other, a *you*. Her internal sense of self has not only been deeply etched emotionally by her mother, but it is also now reflected actually: "It's disturbing when the face you're having trouble forgiving is now your own." The final question lingers as the author and reader realize together how body image is a process of internalizing a myriad of personal, familial, and cultural ideals: "And why is it that the hardest thing for the self to forgive is the self?" Now the essay seems to have become an answer to its own question, a small step toward recognition and, one hopes, healing.

Freewriting Prompt

Write about aspects and elements of your own body, describing not only physical traits but perceptions of your body image. Reflect on where your ideas of what is or is not beautiful have come from.

Braided Bodies

Esinam Bediako's extraordinary "Body/Mind Braid" makes explicit what I have been suggesting throughout this chapter, i.e., in order to understand our internal selves more deeply, we should not ignore our external lives as experienced through our bodies. Touching upon some of the same body image questions that Roripaugh explores, Bediako tells the story of her pregnancy while also describing how "I've never felt at home in my body."

From early on, she experiences racialized standards of beauty: "In elementary school, some kids chased me down in the playground, calling me ugly and worse. I remember their names and their words, but I won't speak or write them, except to point out that one of the things they called me was an ugly African." Her African American classmates considered themselves "more American than me, they figured, since their parents had been born in the US unlike mine." Later, race gives way to sex, when in middle school a boy barks at her and calls her a dog, another boy saying, "You have big boobs" and "You're going to be a slut one day." Bediako admits, "It was too confusing, my body and other people's thoughts about it." Despite being aware that "My soul was what really mattered," Bediako internalizes these comments over time. When she imagines sharing a poem of advice with her hypothetical child in the future, noting how they will be criticized in both racialized and sexualized ways, she stops short of finishing the verse: "*How dare you*, I scolded myself, *give advice you still do not take?*" Instead, her strategy for coping with the world is to detach and disengage.

The description of her pregnancy is vivid and subtle as she feels a "*Vibration*" and a "*flutter*," eventually hearing "a thrumming that I could feel in my bones, my body a conduit for some unnamed thing." As she experiences morning sickness and learns she must have a C-section, her doctor encourages her to "Take deep breaths." While she interprets this as a way to detach from her body in order to avoid pain, the doctor corrects her, explaining that the vagus nerve is "like the mediator between your mind and your body…. It's not about detaching from your body.

It's actually the opposite. It's the most present you can be." The essay ends having braided together Bediako's internal and external life creating an integrated whole as she holds her newborn son for the first time and addresses him: "You are here, and I am. I breathe in and out as deeply as I can. I call into the room my body, my mind, whatever soul I have, to bear witness to you as you take your place on this earth."

Freewriting Prompt

Write about a time when others made assumptions about you because of your appearance. Describe how that made you feel then and explore how it might still affect your sense of self today.

Other Bodies

Writing about your own body can inspire you to acknowledge and honor other people's bodies as well. It can be tricky if you begin writing about other people's bodies, of course, lest you cross into the territory of objectification, criticism, or judgment of one kind or another. Instead, one hopes that as you write, crafting images of other bodies that you encounter in your life will lead to a deeper feeling of sympathy with people, as you develop a keener sense of the embodied existence we are all a part of. An artful example of an essay that renders images of another person's body is Brooke Wonders's "Skinwalk," which opens with an inviting provocation: "To remember sex with someone who's now dead is an act of necrophilia; to recreate a living person on the page a desecration." Despite the warning, Wonders continues to "recreate a living person on the page," each of the seven sections focused on a specific body part of her ex-boyfriend, who had died by suicide. In fact, the *sections* can be almost read as post-mortem *dissections*, as we move from one piece of the body to the next.

The framework of the essay acts as a kind of skeleton upon which these parts can hang together, creating through quick vignettes a sense of the whole person when he was alive. In this way, rather than only dissecting, or *dis*membering, the essay is also a way for the author to *re*connect and *re*member. Not all of these individual parts are equal, however, as the opening sections get progressively longer, from Ear to Hair to Eye, each touching briefly on her ex-boyfriend's body and subsequent death, until arriving at the much longer and more significant portion called "Muscle." Wonders recounts getting a professional massage both before and after the death of her ex, describing the physical sensation but also the feeling of vulnerability she experiences as she offers the reader a revelation: "Bodies conceal our secrets. Those who see our naked bodies can then hurt us. But bodies are also miracles. They feel even when the mind can't." What she feels at the end of the massage is "a powerful heat" leading to disorientation: "I thought *This is bizarre*, and *Please stop,* and *Give that back.*"

The essay winds down the way it ramped up, each successive section of Skin, Arms, and Hand getting progressively shorter until finally we reach the culminating comparison of the "Native American boogieman, the skinwalker" to her experience of grief: "Our memories wear us, and we wear them, brittle and transparent as onionskin. And yet this is also how my body keeps his,

his touch imprinted on me, me living in him and him in me." We can intellectually know certain facts and information about what has happened in our lives, but as Wonders makes clear here, our memories always live in our bodies.

Freewriting Prompt

Write either about a person you've lost or someone you haven't seen in a long time, describing their embodied presence in the world. Explore how they exist in your memory as well as in your own body.

CHAPTER NINE

Forms

The chapters in this section on creative nonfiction began with a discussion of genre, pointing out a few differences between and among essays, stories, and poems. I've attempted to free the *essay* genre from some of the preconceived notions you may have harbored about it, arguing that it is just as artful as fiction or poetry. This final chapter will explore some of the genres *within* the genre of creative nonfiction, offering a few specific examples, and inviting you to try your hand at the wide variety of traditional or experimental forms.

A word of caution, however: as with every lesson in this textbook, whether we're discussing point of view, enjambment, or imagery, as an artist, you will find that you're often not making conscious decisions about the elements of your writing so much as working toward your craft choices. So it goes with the following forms. You might indeed be inspired by the formal innovations you observe in a specific essay and attempt something similar on your own. On the other hand, you might also need to *discover* the final form of your work while in the midst of writing. There is no set path to arrive at art. When generating material, you may find that a poem suddenly morphs into an essay, or an essay into a short story, or a story into something you've never seen before. The same is true when writing creative nonfiction. Your flash nonfiction may expand, your braided essay unravel, your hermit crab essay escape its shell to find a new home elsewhere. Regardless, it will be helpful for you to have a sense of the wide variety of forms available to you as you write and revise your own creative nonfiction.

Flash Nonfiction

Flash nonfiction is usually defined as an essay of no more than a thousand words that offers a brief "flash" of illumination on a single topic, experience, or phenomenon. Because of its brevity, flash nonfiction will necessarily be compressed and very narrowly focused. The very well-respected, long-running online magazine *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction*, founded and edited by Dinty. W. Moore, has done much to legitimize and popularize flash nonfiction in the literary world. In fact, many of the writers in this textbook have also published essays in *Brevity*: Traci Brimhall ("There But For the Grace of God," "Post-Mortem"), Paul Crenshaw ("Foundation," "Shock and Awe"), Jennifer Gravley ("White Space: An Annotation"), Lance Larsen ("A Brief History of Water," "Tired," "The Bluest Eye"), Brandon R. Schrand ("The Essay and the Art of Equivocation"), and Brooke Wonders ("Come Back, Jimmy Dean").

Gabriella Souza's "Connection" is a prime example of flash nonfiction. Weighing in at just under a thousand words, the essay focuses tightly on a very narrow window of time when the author is having a conversation with a man in a Mexico City airport before boarding their plane. While very little action takes place and nothing dramatic occurs, the title gives the reader a sense of the significance we're meant to be alert to. She and the man share many things in common, including a similarity of names (Gabriella and Gabriel), kinship with animals, and fake teeth, but the connections between them eventually give way to tension as they ride a shuttle to their

plane: “He places his strong right hand on my arm. I tense. Perhaps I’ve given the wrong message. Still, I don’t pull back.” This piece of flash nonfiction does not linger very long in any specific scene, summarizing much of the dialogue in the narrative mode in order to move forward more quickly. The end of the essay returns to an image from the beginning: an earthquake Gabriella sees in a cartoon on the plane, echoing the earthquake Gabriel told her he had dreamt about. The “connection” between these two strangers has been severed forever, and the reader is left with a feeling of impending doom as Wile E. Coyote is “flattened, impaled, blown to bits” before “the earth drops from underneath him.” There is a clear beginning, middle, and end in this essay, but there is not much in the way of plot. Flash nonfiction often carries its significance through suggestion or metaphor. In this case, Souza offers a snapshot of a brief encounter with a stranger, highlighting the ephemerality of the connection between them.

Another excellent example of a flash essay is Taylor Brorby’s “Confluence,” which is not bound by time the way Souza’s “Connection” is. Rather, it focuses on a specific geographical place where the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers meet in North Dakota, the author’s home state. Brorby moves back and forth through time rapidly, leaping hundreds—and even thousands of years—through geological eras to describe how “a glacier pressed and pushed sediment, rolled rocks against mud, against water, and changed the course of these rivers.” The essay settles into specific vivid moments taking place at the confluence, portraying pelicans sunning themselves and imagining oneself lying down in the rivers. As is common in flash nonfiction, these lyrical moments take on even more significance because we only get quick glimpses. Another scene showing men fishing for paddlefish doesn’t explain itself so much as suggest by juxtaposition the relationship between humans and these rivers. Finally, Brorby’s voice enters the essay to explain rather than show the significance of the confluence for him:

> This place contains story—a story of two men sent by a redheaded president in search of the watery Northwest Passage. A story of a seventy-million-year-old fish that sucks and slurps zooplankton. And a story of convergence, of joining, of Confluence.

The stories contained in the confluence carry ancient, historical, but also personal meaning for Brorby, as the place “serves as the best framework to understand myself.” The confluence is important both literally and figuratively, as a phenomenon that resonates symbolically, suggesting that there may be places in the world that hold similarly important significance for us.

Writing Prompt

Write a flash essay that narrowly focuses either on a specific span of time or on a specific place that is meaningful to you. Be on the lookout for metaphorical and/or symbolic significance. Challenge yourself by limiting your essay to 500-750 words while still clearly developing a beginning, middle, and end.

The Braided Essay

The braided essay develops two or more different ideas or narratives that alternate and move forward together until the end. Imagine this form containing multiple threads or strands that you are wrapping artfully around one another to create an overall effect: thus the braid. Each thread might stand alone, but in juxtaposition with the other threads, it both gives and receives more meaning. The braided essay has become very popular in recent years, likely because the arrangement of the threads places sometimes unlikely pieces of information next to one another, revealing insights or suggesting truths that might otherwise have never been discovered. Naomi J. Williams writes humorously and instructively about having grown tired of the braided essay in "Braids: A Braided Essay About Braids & Braided Essays." Even so Williams recognizes the power of the form: "Here's the thing about any successfully braided thing: It's an object of beauty. The heft of a braid in the hand. That taut, satiny smoothness. The visual pleasure of the weave. The sensuous strength of the strands holding each other in place."

Esinam Bediako embraces the form, announcing it in the title of her essay "Body/Mind Braid," which weaves together two separate but related strands. The first strand follows the narrative of her pregnancy. Bediako suffers the stress of morning sickness, news that she would need a C-section because her uterus had been damaged from fibroid surgery, news that she was a carrier for the Tay-Sachs gene, and microaggressions from co-workers. In the second strand, she describes experiences from her past that have shaped her body image in both racialized and sexualized ways, from being called an "ugly African" by her African American classmates, to being called "a dog" with "big boobs" who was "gonna be a slut one day" by middle school boys. These taunts led to Bediako shutting down, hiding herself and her body from the world. Where the two strands intersect, we see the greater significance as the doctor corrects her assumption that breathing "helps you detach from pain and other distractions." Rather, breathing is "not about detaching from your body. It's actually the opposite. It's the most present you can be." The essay ends optimistically as she holds her infant son with a newfound sense of wholeness and presence.

Because of its brevity, William Stobb's "Doom" can be considered a piece of flash nonfiction, too, but it's instructive for our purposes to demonstrate how you can braid an essay even if it's very brief, in this case only a little over eight hundred words. At first glance, you might call "Doom" a kind of *collage* essay, which simply places fragmented pieces next to one another, allowing the reader to infer meaning through juxtaposition. This technique is similar to the braid, but the effect is subtly different. The braided essay picks up its strands later rather than letting them sit by themselves as individual pieces. "Doom" focuses very squarely on the concept of doom and Stobbs' experiences of it. The one reliable strand in the essay follows the author watching the beginning of Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* on his laptop, from the opening music to the monolith scene where an ape "is able to imagine using a large bone to bludgeon another creature and then immediately does so and becomes human." The other strands are shorter, not random but undeveloped beyond a short paragraph: a description of the first-person shooter game Doom, the feeling that humanity is doomed, the origin story of the Marvel villain Doctor Doom, the etymology of the word *doom* in English. The end diverges from reality as Stobb extrapolates from the etymology, cinematically imagining the death scene of a tenth-century Viking.

Writing Prompt

Write three paragraphs about separate but related things. If one of your paragraphs tells the story of something that happened to you, write another two paragraphs that fill in related backstory about your life. If one of your paragraphs is about a specific concept or phenomenon, write another two paragraphs that look at it from different perspectives or in different contexts.

The Lyric Essay

The lyric essay has one obvious defining characteristic: it's written primarily in the lyrical mode. As we briefly discussed in an earlier chapter, the lyrical mode is writing that pays close attention to the sound of language. It can coincide with either the dramatic mode in scenes or in the narrative mode during summary or exposition. An analysis of this textbook's anthology would reveal that every piece of writing contains some elements (phrases, sentences, passages) that are in the lyrical mode. The lyric essay, therefore, is not a difference in kind but in degree. Because it often blurs the line between poetry and prose, the lyric essay can be considered a hybrid form. In fact, the lyric essay usually overlaps with one or more of the forms you will find in this chapter. Lyric essays tend to be brief, but they pack a punch as the lyrical mode lingers, lifting the reader from the mundane into a realm of greater significance. The lyrical mode itself signals this greater significance, therefore demanding that we pay close attention.

Wendy Gaudin's "Beauty" is a lyric essay par excellence. As the author explains in "On 'Beauty'," the essay is inspired by the beauty of Louisiana Creole women as they appeared in family narratives: "Beauty as a trait became embodied in a character, a woman who is a common ancestor to us all." We witness the origin of this character and follow her story through time, but Gaudin never stops to explain the many references, from geographical locations to the names of slave ships. Nor does she dwell too long in any single moment. In fact, the reader cannot piece together a singular narrative because the narrative is not singular. It would also be hard to pinpoint specific scenes that are allowed to develop. Rather, the lyric essay encompasses the many different manifestations of Beauty, derived from "three main historical phenomena: the trade in slaves by settlers to Louisiana, the displacement of Louisiana's indigenous people, and the creative, ingenious ways of overcoming suffering practiced by enslaved people themselves. We are settler/indigenous/slave all at the same time."

The essay opens biblically, as though establishing a creation story, "In the beginning," sweeping across the land and showing "Beauty in the four directions." It's worthwhile to pause and admire the lyricism:

> Beauty in the frigid and pale north where the pelican and the egret blend into the glittery frost; Beauty in the scorched and dark south where turtles take their sweet time, stewing in the faithful heat, and alligators swirl in shiny hot waters; Beauty in the rising plenty of the east, wet with the dew of eternal early mornings, of baby whistling ducks and

> cackling geese forever in their fluffy, untested feathers; Beauty in the dry and aging west, as gray-haired red wolves say goodnight, goodnight.

The rhythms are carried along by the repetition of "Beauty in the," each part containing vivid images of landscape and wildlife. Gaudin renders the creation myth of America itself, ending with "Mother Mississippi, the water that birthed us all."

The landscape gets more specific as we encounter "Cane River and Bayou Tech, the Bogue Falaya and the Tunica Hills," and we a follow a history of colonization in the region from the Gulf of Mexico up the Mississippi. The main character is enmeshed but not bound by history as the essay moves through time and space to trace not only the story of Beauty herself but also the destructive force of "desire for Beauty" animating history, which "followed her like a scent." The essay ends with another destructive force, hatred of Beauty: "Those white women on stately porches and riding in calfskin carriages: they hated them some Beauty." Barely over eight hundred words, this exquisite lyric essay proves that brief work can nevertheless cover a lot of ground.

Writing Prompt

Write the narrative of a region you know well, creating a composite character that allows you to move through time and space quickly, tracing history but diverging as needed. Include as many historical allusions as you need to, but be sure to develop specific vivid images as well. Throughout the writing, pay close attention to the rhythms of your sentences, employing repetition of both sound and syntax to help the work cohere lyrically.

The Hermit Crab Essay

Because hermit crabs are born without shells, they survive by living in the emptied shells of other animals, like snails. Their names are derived from seeming like a hermit hiding in their shells like a cave. Like the crab itself, the hermit crab essay goes out in search of another "shell" in which to live, borrowing a form from another kind of text as a new container. As Brenda Miller explains in "The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer: A Case Study," this new container, is not neutral. Whether it's in the form of "a 'to-do' list, or a field guide, or a recipe," it's important to discover "what kind of content that form suggests. This is the essential move: allowing form to dictate content." Miller demonstrates finding her content in her hermit crab essay "We Regret To Inform You," which takes the form a series of rejection notes. At first the notes are somewhat light, but they eventually take a turn toward the more vulnerable. Whatever form you might select, don't follow the structure away from your own life experiences. Rather, follow it toward something real, something honest, something only you could write.

Jennifer Gravley's "Proposing a World without a Mother: Grief and Creative Nonfiction as a Sense-Making Tool" is a good model for developing content within a form as a way to discover something personally meaningful. This self-referential essay explains its own design:

> Because this comparison [between grief theory and creative writing] took place within the form of a proposal for an academic essay, I now utilize this received form as a way to integrate the research with my personal narrative. The narrative is interspersed, it interrupts, exemplifies, and perhaps contradicts the proposal. The form of the proposal is doubly fitting because the work of storytelling in grief is to "propose" a new world, a new self.

Not only does the proposal format contain the personal narrative, it helps to process the grieving process that Gravley is experiencing. The juxtaposition of academic language with italicized passages of expressive writing is jarring, which is precisely the point. For instance, note the tone of the following sentence: "It is assumed that the loss of a parent is a sad event that produces intense grief and takes a significant amount of time, probably the rest of the bereaved individual's life, to process." This kind of writing attempts to be objective, detaching itself from the experience of grief itself. Compare the effect of this academic writing with the panic and emotion of the following scene:

> *You were there for her last breath but didn't realize it was her last at the time—you can only ever realize after, in the absence of another. Your sister was frantic on the phone with the hospice nurse. You were desperately trying to open the little bottle of morphine, which you were dripping into her feeding tube not for pain, because she complained of none the whole day, but to help relax the panic of not being able to breathe. Afterward, her face looked plastic, waxen, changed colors. Her eyes stayed a tiny bit open.*

Because it is couched within the proposal, this scene feels more visceral, more honest, a peek behind the facade of the controlled academic discourse. The proposal itself begins to feel like a coping mechanism, the same way Gravley admits to practicing writing the word *mother* rather than *momma* "because it furthered the distance that writing already puts between writer and event." She develops the trappings of the proposal (Thesis Statement, Review of Literature, Methodology, and so on), allowing it to reveal a genuine insight into writing and grieving: "Writing is in fact a form of preservation of self," she explains, admitting that writing this hermit crab essay was "*the only way to live with or through anything—construct a story about it. And like all writing—revise. Find comfort in form, structure, pattern, indulge in breaking it*." In the end, because "*Remembering overrides memories*," her advice, to us and herself, is to "*Tell yourself the story until you are in it*." Gravley not only found comfort in form, but she also found words that allowed readers to identify with and understand their own experiences of grief.

Writing Prompt

Make a list of as many textual forms as you can that might be an appropriate container for a hermit crab essay. Tax return, Instagram post, resume, dating app profile, artist statement, crossword puzzle, classified ad. Ask yourself what content is suggested by this form. What emotions, memories, and experiences are adjacent to this form? Now write an essay that cleaves to this form while developing something real, honest, and possibly vulnerable.

The List

The list essay defines itself: an essay that is a list. You might consider the list essay a subset of the hermit crab essay. The difference is that lists are much more general than the hermit crab forms tend to be. You can list anything: fugitives, groceries, Communists, children who are naughty or nice. Lists might be tightly focused on a specific topic, or they might be broadly thematic. They might be chronological or ahistorical. You have a lot of freedom when writing a list essay. In "To Do or Not To Do: On the Comfort of List Essays," Jill Kolongowski touts the virtues of the list essay, namely the ease with which a list can "put a small bit of sense in the senseless." A list suggest order, perhaps even priority. "The list essay is what I use to get unstuck," admits Kolongowski. "When narrative or plot or sense seem impossible, there are still rhythms, juxtapositions, and crescendos worthy of consideration." The list is forgiving. It takes the pressure off as you're writing.

Lucienne S. Bloch's "365 New Words a Year: October" is a very ordered chronological list that presents all thirty-one words appearing on her word of the day desk calendar, from *eristic* to *skookum*. Following each entry, Bloch writes a miniature essay anywhere from fifty to four hundred words. These brief vignettes responds sometimes directly and sometimes obliquely to each of the words. For instance, in response to the word *mumpsimus* ("a person who clings obstinately to an exposed error in practice or expression"), she describes a wedding invitation she received by email rather than a proper printed one. She sent a gift but had not yet received a thank you note in return. Bloch laments "the prolapse of civility," but the implication is that she suspects that she might, indeed, be the *mumpsimus* in question. In a brief poignant entry, she responds to the word *concinnity* ("a close harmony; a blending") by explaining how she sometimes enters her old childhood room in her mother's apartment, where her father died, "just to be me in a mix of tenses, among them the past, the historical present, the future perfect, the past continuous, and the durative." This harmonious blending is similar to the overall effect of the essay itself, each piece resonating with the others. Another entry, responding to *scoon* ("to skip across water like a flat stone"), seems to speak to the design of the list essay: "These anecdotal fragments are dots on grids of ifs: possibilities of given words. I bingo or I don t. Either way, it's a little breather before I tackle the taller orders of the day." The overall effect of the *scooning concinnity* of Bloch's list of words is not a portrait of the stubborn *mumpsimus* but someone who is open to discover new things about her past and present self, and the world she inhabits.

The daring title of Samantha Edmonds's "An Incomplete List of Sad Beautiful Things that Almost but Don't Quite Manage to Make Clear to Me How Anyone Continues to Love Anything Knowing Someday It Will All Be Gone" gets your attention by its sheer length, but it also signals what to expect from the writing that follows, namely a list essay that is tinged with items that are poignant, i.e., "sad and beautiful." You might think this essay is only a list of six individual things (the Sweat, smell of fish, clinic waiting rooms, birdseed, and so on), but Edmonds includes allusions to phrases and ideas appearing elsewhere, the final item bringing everything together through her "second pack of cigarettes in four hours," during which the beautiful sadness culminates in a fearful confrontation of mortality. The author readily admits in the title that her list

is incomplete—she could've included many more sad beautiful things—but the reader doesn't have a sense that it could go on and on forever because it resolves itself so definitively, so beautifully.

Writing Prompt

Make a list of things that will allow you to find some deeper personal significance beyond the items themselves. It might be a list of your favorite songs when you were a kid, a list of reasons why you're a night person or morning person, a list of imaginary animals you've invented, a list of exes and their character traits (or flaws), a list of gifts you wish you'd gotten at Christmas. The list can be anything. The structure of putting one thing after the other is a heuristic that will allow you to generate new material. Once you have a list you're satisfied with, try to find patterns and organize the items to enhance the experience you want the reader to have.

Experiments on the Page

Finally, your creative nonfiction need not be bound by the conventions of printed prose. Like poets, essayists can play around with the arrangement of words on the page itself. If you think of the page as a canvas on which you are painting your words, you might discover great creative freedom that will lead you to places you hadn't anticipated. One way to experiment is to play with specific textual elements that are not often associated with literary writing, like footnotes. Lee Ann Roripaugh's "Notes on Beauty" uses footnotes to great effect, offering asides and background information while maintaining the forward momentum of the essay. In fact, the footnotes almost become another essay unto themselves. Other ideas might include changing the size of your font strategically, or using superscripts or subscripts so that some words appear higher than other words. Most word processing software nowadays allows you to play around with the colors of your words, and you might find a reason to experiment with shades of gray so that words seem to shimmer, half-erased, disappearing. If you're more technically inclined, you might also use software like Adobe Photoshop or InDesign to create visual effects with your text.

The key is that playing with the page in these ways could come across as a gimmick if you don't allow the experiment to inform your writing. If you're writing about being color blind, changing the font color could be thematically interesting. If you're writing about ethical "gray areas," changing the shade of the font might work well. Lauren Osborn's "Hole" experiments with the page in a very successful and straightforward way, creating a striking shape in the middle of her text. The hole that appears on the page is not a gimmick at all. Rather, the essay addresses various holes, beginning with the author's mother having "discovered a hole in her abdomen, right beside her belly button." The essay leaps from one instance of a hole in the author's life or consciousness to another, each separated by the appearance of a slash: a hole in a favorite sweater, a black hole, a peephole. Osborn returns more than once to the hole in her mother's abdomen, but nothing is resolved. Instead, after having mused on stigmata and imagining holes in her own hand, the essay ends with a suggestive image: "I'm holding a silver sliver of knife against my palm, boring down until the skin on my heartline splits, deepens. Another emptiness

to fill.” Rather than spelling things out directly, Osborn cleverly allows the reader to fill the holes in this essay.

Writing Prompt

Write a paragraph of autobiographical prose, describing a vivid memory or important moment in your life. Print the paragraph out on paper and cut each individual word out. Push the words around on the page until you find a satisfying arrangement that somehow informs the writing itself. Alternatively, use word processing or graphic design software to play around with your paragraph, changing the size, shape, and/or color of words to create specific effects. Allow this individual paragraph to spark an idea for a longer essay like Roripaugh’s or Osborn’s.

CHAPTER ONE

One Great Way to Write a Short Story

When I was a graduate student at Kansas State my stories tended to run sideways: a series of scenes upon scenes with turns and twists and lots of reveals, but something about the whole process felt like I was in search of a structure, or hoping everything would just work out. I knew stories were about change and I just kept adding scene upon scene hoping somewhere along the way the change would just happen. There was a random episodic quality to my stories and all of them ran 30 or so pages. As a writer I was just trying to survive the story, inventing more and more stuff to keep going.

Needless to say, none of these stories "worked."

During the beginning of my second year at Kansas State I had the opportunity to work with Professor Ben Nyberg (then the Fiction Editor of *Kansas Quarterly)*, sitting in and helping to teach his Beginning Fiction class, and it was there I discovered a scaffolding to hang my stories on. His approach was rooted in the modernist era, the works of Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Mansfield, and John Steinbeck.

Instead of approaching stories from a theatrical vantage point: the Freytag triangle with its rising action (a series of battles), climax, denouement (falling action and resolution), Nyberg threw out this upside-down V-shaped architecture for a three act structure: exposition, crisis (with a deflection), and resolution.

Realist stories are about ordinary people placed in extraordinary circumstances. It's about a day where a pattern is broken. Every morning a husband awakes late, kisses his wife on the cheek as she rushes off to her academic job, and then hurriedly drinks orange juice and gobbles down cold eggs. He then goes to his job at WKBW Buffalo as a television newscaster. He starts at point A and goes to point B. But in Nyberg's model, he never gets to point B. On this one particular morning the newscaster's wife appears distracted, making little eye contact, and then says things aren't working between them, 'I feel like there's less and less of me here, and let's try a trial separation." Instead of B the newscaster is headed to a new dimension C (the story's crisis phase). Instead of going to work he heads to Niagara Falls and visits a series of wax museums and meets a woman who has got a sure scheme to win at the casino. She invites him to join her. Now the stakes are much higher and we are in on a different day, a day full of drama, a day worth exploring.

Stories are about life and death stakes (real or imagined) and how characters react while under duress. Hollywood of the neoclassical period (1930-1960) believed in the following storytelling

premise: "a noble character overcoming a series of obstacles to achieve a worthy goal." In writing realistic fiction characters don't have to be noble. They just have to be interesting. Act One begins the process of creating an interesting lead character.

This is the expository phase of a short story (the first act) where something creates a destabilizing condition, a shift from the every day that throws the lead character into chaos. A person you haven't seen in years arrives at your doorstep. Your boss tells you to close the door, we need to talk. Your doctor says we need to do further tests. Rational order and calm break down. The narrative escalates, and some empathy is created for our lead character who is in some way beset upon.

During the crisis phase (act two) the protagonist is in conflict with another person who wants something different from the protagonist and this push/pull creates not only tension but moments of genuine connect and disconnect between them. At some point, during this emotional struggle, a deflection happens. A character makes a choice, acts on it, and the scene spins in a new direction. This deflection can include saying something that has never been said before; seeing something in the other person that the protagonist has never noticed before; taking an action that is new and pushes the lead character out of her comfort zone; etc. The possibilities are endless. The spin should direct the protagonist toward a resolution.

For Nyberg, that resolution (act three) often leads to an epiphany (the lead character coming to some sort of insight about herself or the situation or the other person or the human condition), but an epiphanic ending isn't necessary. The protagonist can realize something has shifted between her and the other person (notice I didn't say antagonist: not all stories are a fight between good and evil) without fully realizing what that shift is. Or the protagonist is taking baby steps at the end. The story can even end at a precipice where the protagonist has undergone change but still faces further changes to come. For example, two people sit in a car while the motor's running, and the man realizes something about the woman he had never realized before (he has an epiphany). He wants to build on this moment, to apologize for his boorish behavior and some inappropriate comment he made about her at a party earlier that evening. He struggles to find the words, where to begin, and the story ends as she waits, the motor choogling, and the light in the parking lot intermittently flickering.

Some nuts and bolts: these stories are very often scene driven, involve three to four characters, and take place over a short period of time (a few hours in a day or events over two days). The crisis scene often takes place in twenty minutes or less and the resolution, following on the heels of the crisis, is even shorter. In terms of length, the exposition and crisis phase are usually of similar length and the resolution about half to a third as long. Stories in this format usually run from anywhere from 12–15 pages.

Crime and romance novels and classic films have an "M" shape to their narratives. They too have a three-act structure but *two* major deflections, plot moments that spin the protagonist off in a new

direction. William P. McGivern's *The Big Heat* is a prime example. The novel begins with a suicide and Sgt. Dave Bannion investigating. But he's disengaged, distant, not completely focused. A third of the way through the novel his wife is killed by a car bomb meant for him. Suddenly, the stakes are higher and Bannion spins off into pure vengeance mode. He wants to punish and target those who killed his wife. He no longer feels connected to humanity. Two thirds of the way through the novel Bannion uncovers the root of evil, but he's powerless to do anything. He tells Debby Ward, the novel's good-bad girl, of his dangerous desires and she kills the person that Bannion, because he's a cop, can't. She even uses his gun. This is the novel's second deflection. Her actions cause the "big heat to fall" (names of the guilty are released to the press and police) and Bannion, now healed, is reintegrated into society.

I usually find the hardest component of the three act story is getting the exposition right. Once I have the deflection, the resolution writes itself, but in the expository phase I have no idea where the story is headed so I often have to go back and set up things to earn my ending. The main thing to remember is that the character in the end must be different from the character at the beginning but the change must be slight. We must believe that the character in the expository phase is possible of the change revealed in the resolution stage. Moreover, the ending should be inevitable but not predictable. That's a lot for a writer to handle, but always strive for what Aristotle called the consistent inconsistencies of character.

As you can probably see, from my above comments, when it comes to writing literary fiction I'm a pantser (a seat of your pants writer) not a plotter (I don't pre-arrange things). However, the Nyberg model does give me a structure to fall back on: I know that at some point in the storytelling process a deflection will occur and this will create the energy or engine for the story's dynamism and conflict. So in a way, I guess, I'm a bit of a plantser (a mix of seat of your pants writing and plotting).

One final caveat: all right, I know this all sounds pretty formulaic. And in a way it is. But if you're struggling like I was when I first started sifting through scenes in search of a story worth telling, this structure will help you to write a story that "works." Within four years of learning this structure I was landing stories in literary magazines. And yes, after a while, I got tired of writing the three-act story and branched out to differing story shapes. But for ten years this was a great way to hone my craft.

Case Study #1: "The Raid."

In 1934, John Steinbeck published "The Raid" in the pages of the *North American Review*. It tells the story of two communist labor organizers, one older (Dick) and the other underaged (Root), who arrive at a small town in order to spread their communist pamphlets. The destabilizing condition: Root has never done this before and he knows that they could very well get beat down by a raiding

party who isn't too particular about their brand of politics. He's afraid he might fold under the pressure. Dick has done this many times before and keeps telling Root to "take hold."

In Act Two (the crisis) they enter "a low square building" where they plan to hold their meeting and discover that they only have oil in one of their two lamps. Things are moving sideways. A stranger enters and tells them to "scram . . . The others were just going to leave you take it." No one from the communist party will be there to support them and the raiding party is bigger than expected. This leads into the story's deflection. The men, at this point, could run, but they decide to stay. Dick says, "Thanks for telling us. You run along. We'll be alright." They got their orders.

Root goes along with Dick but he's afraid, afraid of being scared, of getting hurt. Dick repeatedly tells him to take hold, and during the confrontation with the raiding party Root begins a transformation, the story's deflection has spun him to a new place of understanding. He's the first to speak, calling the men brothers. They hit him with a two by four and he gets back on his feet, suddenly filled with purpose: "His breath burst passionately. His hands were steady now, his voice sure and strong. His eyes were hot with ecstasy."

The two men are beaten into unconsciousness.

Later, they awake in a prison hospital. Dick has a busted arm and some cracked ribs. Root's muffled with "dull pain" and reaches a mini-epiphany. This is Act three, the story's resolution. He connects his experience to the Bible and how he wanted to forgive because "they don't know what they're doing." Dick chastises the kid, telling him to lay off that religious stuff, but Root gets the last word: "It was just—I felt like saying that. It was just kind of the way I felt." A reversal has taken place: the pupil has learned something; by contrast, the teacher remains stuck within a system of thinking that doesn't allow for connections with anything outside communist dogma. Root is pushing back against Dick, and in a way, he is moving forward.

Case Study #2: "A Twister on Stage Fourteen"

Here, Frannie Dove revisits classic storytelling structure. Set in 1939, Dove's story, like Steinbeck's, centers around an older character, Mr. Ross, a WWI veteran, and a younger character, Dane Gray. This time, however, our empathy is with the teacher rather than the pupil. The story revolves around the armor men wear to protect themselves and the need to connect, and as in the case of Sgt. Dave Bannion of *The Big Heat* to re-integrate to humanity.

The two work in the props department (negotiating air hoses and dirt and a muslin tornado) on Soundstage fourteen for *The Wizard of Oz*. Dane knows that Mr. Ross was wounded in the leg during the Great War and that he cried while hearing Judy Garland's rendition of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Ross is taken aback by this and doesn't really want to explore these aspects of his life.

But, he does connect with Dane, covering for the kid while he has a coughing fit up in the rafters. If Dane's spotted coughing, he'll be sent home.

In the story's second act, the deflection occurs: "The hose hissed, and then a thunder shook the stage. Something sparked and exploded, rattling the walls of the set, like a cannon, like a grenade. There were screams from the crew. I dropped to the ground for cover, taking the kid with me, but he wasn't the kid anymore. He was Frank, in the flesh, eighteen years old, pale as a ghost and terrified. A thousand bullets whistled over us, and I covered our heads for protection." Suddenly Ross has returned to the war, and his PTSD flashback has him slipping between two moments of time. It's a private moment: all internalized.

It's discovered that a compressor had inadvertently exploded. After work, Ross drives Dane to his aunt and uncle's home. The kid is covered in dirt and somewhat disillusioned: "You stand in the dirt all day. Nobody thanks you for what you do. Don't days like this seem ridiculous? It's a long piece of stocking and a three-foot-tall house. Will people really believe it's a twister?"

This is the story's central theme, illusion versus reality and what does Ross ultimately believe? In the third act, the story's resolution, Dane doesn't show up to work the next day. Ross expected to never see the kid again—after all Dane can lean into his privilege—but Ross needs the job, and in the story's final moments resigns himself to the magic of the dream factory, hoping briefly to find peace and wholeness: "They wouldn't see a group of stagehands shooting dirt from an air compressor. They'd see damage and danger, nature and destruction. For a couple hours in the theater, they would be transported. And perhaps for some, when they saw the right picture at the right time, it would be all they needed to feel alive again." The final epiphany has an outside-looking-in quality. What if Ross isn't one of the "for some," what if he can't be "transported." Then, he may never feel alive again. The ending is wonderfully strange: sad, enigmatic, and ambiguous.

Exercise:

Write a Nyberg story. Begin with a destabilizing condition; something that places an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances. This moment will throw your world out of stasis and into conflict. Deepen the conflict in your exposition phase (act one) by involving another person. They both want something but they want *different* things. In act two deepen the conflict to a boiling point where a narrative turn happens (this will be the deflection). From the turn, your protagonist will be sent spinning in a direction that they've never experienced before. Remember: in your crisis scene characters should be saying or doing things they've never said or done before. Following the deflection we reach the resolution. Your lead character should come to some kind of knowledge, epiphany, or be taking baby steps in that direction (they might not fully get it yet, but they will, maybe, some day). Of course, you can also write the false epiphany story, where instead of being "derided by vanity" in what they learn (as in James Joyce's "Araby") they conclude, falsely, that

they'll never die (as in Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp"). The journey has been so traumatizing, your lead character comes out the other side of it embracing a falsehood.

CHAPTER TWO

Plotting

In the previous chapter I mentioned how the Nyberg model can provide us with a scaffolding (exposition/crisis with a deflection/and a resolution) to hang our story on.

Scenes also have scaffolding. Good scene work answers a question while also asking a new question for our protagonist to lean into. We string together enough scenes and we have a causal narrative chain of events that makes sense. We don't necessarily know what's going to happen in the scenes we're composing but we know the answer/question pattern has to be in play to survive the hard work of writing the story and sustaining its narrative arc.

Similarly there are classic plot shapes that announce themselves to us as the story unfolds. They're ingrained into our western storytelling DNA. Jerome Stern explored several of these plot archetypes in his fine book, *Making Shapely Fiction*. Here are my takes, slight re-workings, of seven of them.

The Quest

This is perhaps the oldest of storytelling shapes. Northrop Frye in *The Secular Scripture* connected it to a master Biblical narrative: the garden/the desert/the garden; Paradise; Paradise Lost; Paradise Regained. Characters begin in a kind of Eden; something disrupts their world, and they are sent into the wilderness on a quest. They complete the quest and return home, fundamentally changed. This is the plot shape to John Ford's *The Searchers*. A massacre takes place. Ethan and Marty (Jeffrey Hunter) go on a seven-year exile in search of Debbie (Ethan's niece) who is now held in captivity by the Comanche. Ethan, a racist, wants to kill as many Indians as possible; Marty wants to find and protect Debbie from Ethan. They all return. Marty's perspective on whiteness has changed. He's aware of his outsider status while also having a greater sense of belonging and kinship that isn't tied into blood lines. Ethan returns, but doesn't really belong in the new, more inclusive society, and thus in the film's final image the door shuts on him, and he's left adrift, to wander the earth. Debbie, married briefly to Chief Scar, literally crosses the threshold into the homestead, left to wonder how she'll be accepted by her white neighbors.

In crime stories of the American hard-boiled tradition, the detective's journey is often pyrrhic. What he uncovers on his quest is dark, disturbing, and the results of discovery cause him to die a little (figuratively) in solving the mystery.

Overall these stories are goal-oriented and lend themselves to action and volatile, often violent encounters. What these characters want is relatively clear. What are they willing to do to get it?

The Epiphany

James Joyce is most known for this form, the insight narrative. These are character-driven stories, firmly rooted in quotidian naturalism, that end with the protagonist suddenly realizing something. The plot can be somewhat episodic, a series of apparently discordant events, or it can be a well-orchestrated narrative that leads to a single resonating effect. The radiance felt at the end can be bright and resounding or a dim glow. The character can be significantly changed or taking baby steps in a new direction.

I had a creative writing teacher who once said all narratives are about coming to knowledge. That may be over simplifying things, but the epiphany narrative often focuses on lifting the veil off innocence, and revealing the corruption below the surface. There's a sense of the powerless gaining power through hard-fought life experiences.

The Peripheral Narrator

This is one of my favorite plot lines: a peripheral narrator tells the story of a much more flashy character. It's as if the flashy "specimen" character is being observed under a microscope. The peripheral narrator watches, empathizes, and comments on the actions of the "main" character. Many of us writers are observers in life, and this narrative lends itself to a position many of us are comfortable with, this outside-looking-in perspective. The point of view can be loving, critical, endearing, admiring, or a combination of any of these.

The point-of-view gives the story an element of restraint. We can create a wild character, but the peripheral narrator keeps things in check. William Wordsworth once said about poetry that form and meter controls the emotion, giving poetry that necessary quality of being reflected in tranquility. I see a peripheral narrator functioning in a similar way.

However, Rust Hills, a long-time Fiction Editor at *Esquire*, had what he referred to as Hills's Law: a story with a peripheral narrator is about two characters, two people are changed by the events in the story, the flashy character and the peripheral voice telling the story. Hills's model: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The story is as much about the very private and quiet Nick Carraway as it is about the flashy playboy who associates with gangsters, Jay Gatsby. Gatsby is murdered by the end of the story, and Nick needs to get away from it all and the people of the leisure class.

Collage

I'll talk more about the iceberg story in the fourth chapter that focuses on the inner/outer components to narrative showing and telling, but this technique relies on photographic realism. We stay on the surface of things and rely on our readers drawing inferences from what they see in a scene and across scenes.

The art of subtext is doubled: inside scenes and across scenes.

Very much in the spirit of Soviet Cinema of the 1920s, a juxtaposition of images creates a series of meanings. The Kuleshov effect: a man looks to his left; cut to a bowl of soup; back to the man. We connect the images: oh, he must be hungry.

In this plot line, from the collision of short photographic scenes, emerges a narrative thread. Scenes should be evocative, attention grabbing, a series of haunting tableaux.

What to be wary of: make sure the story doesn't become over-determined. Good scenes in a narrative chain should close off a prior question while opening up a new one to be explored. The danger with a collage narrative is that the scenes can get stuck in a replicating sameness: a father with his son at a restaurant makes fun of a waitress's lisp, and imitates her voice in a falsetto Elmer Fudd pitch; later, on the subway ride home he comments on a stranger's body odor, saying something sure is gamey in here; once he's back at his apartment he tells his wife about the "bad rug" his boss wore at work and "honey don't you think it's time you started your diet? You could be in the Macy's Day Parade—on a string." In each scene he makes offensive shaming comments and the boy witnesses it all, feeling more and more distant from his dad. Yes, the insults escalate, but the story appears to be announcing itself too soon. Dad or the boy needs a counter-movement, something to re-route the story's trajectory.

Slice of Life

Stories are about change, but slice of life stories really lean into the fictional world's dirty realism setting: a night shift at a diner in which the wait staff is slammed because of an all-city band concert; a few hours for a weekly poker game; a thirty-minute guitar lesson. The strength of this story is in the details. That customer at the diner who complains that the pancakes are undercooked; the manager who checks the garbage for unused jellies; the waitress who flirts with the male customers and pays little attention to their wives or partners. In slice of life plots, the writer focuses on both routine and non-routine incidents. What makes the telling of this particular day different from any other day? What makes the ordinary experience suddenly extraordinary? How is the protagonist, placed under duress, changed? Readers will feel like they're understanding things from the inside,

what it means to be a waiter, a cab driver, a contract worker installing new windows, a teacher who works with the deaf.

The Visit and A Gathering of Strangers

Raymond Chandler once wrote that whenever you're stuck and don't know what to do next in a crime story, have two characters carrying guns crash through the door. He's being a little bit facetious but the tenant still holds: a collision with another character creates all kinds of possibilities for a writer to survive the act of writing the story.

Both of these plot shapes revolve around what happens when a person or persons are placed in the same space with differing frames of reference.

The Visit often involves some sense of returning as a protagonist is confronted with the past or seeks to escape into an irretrievable past. Your protagonist is a former criminal who has moved to an upstate New York town. He now works as an auto mechanic when an unexpected car pulls up at the station. A figure smiles menacingly behind the windshield. "Hi, Tom. Or what name are you going by now?" The stranger's hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Boss Gettys says hi. You remember Gettys?" Our protagonist is about to be forced back into a world of crime.

Family dynamics often make for good drama in stories of this type: the always popular sister in high school, now in her early thirties, shows up at your door one morning and asks you to drive her and her daughter to Canada to escape her abusive husband.

In A Gathering of Strangers a group of disparate people are forced together through abject circumstances: a bus breaks down in a snowstorm. People who don't know each other are sheltered in a local church basement. The situation draws people together and through counterpointed characterization tensions can arise, stories told.

Of course all of these plot shapes can be mixed and matched, pulled out of our big pot of storytelling gumbo.

Scaffolding

Guitarists borrow licks from other guitarists; filmmakers pay homage to films they admire (when Travis Bickle of *Taxi Driver* looks into a glass of fizzing alka-seltzer director Martin Scorsese is doing a shout out to a meditative moment in Jean-Luc Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her).*

And writers, if you ask them, and they're totally truthful, will give several instances of where the work of others has inspired creative choices they've made.

These creative choices can involve plotting.

Let's say you're writing a realistic slightly cruelly absurdist story that features a couch and two couples (one older; one younger) and it's an after party party in which the couples are arguing departmental politics (the wives are English professors; the husbands are underemployed: one's an adjunct instructor; the other a part-time librarian). Hmm. Where have I seen this before? Here the narrative is playing with and inverting some of the structures of Edward Albee's classic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

I borrow and mix the scaffolding from other plots all the time.

And the example above I borrowed from "A Man in the Water," an essay Robert Boswell wrote for our *Feed the Lake* collection of craft essays (NAR Press, 2016).

Full confession: I love film noir. When I was a graduate student I purchased Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's *The Film Noir Encyclopedia* and during the six years I pursued my PhD I tracked down and watched over 80% of the films listed in their hefty tome. So is it any wonder that some of this scaffolding found its way into my literary fiction?

In my short story "Essentials" I borrowed from the classic noir *Laura* and Bernard Malamud's coming-of-age story "A Summer's Reading." In *Laura*, detective Mark McPherson investigates a murder and falls in love with the alleged decedent (he's read her diaries) and fetishizes her through a painting of her he admires in the living room. The film explores obsession. One night, McPherson after falling asleep in front of the painting is awakened by the smell of perfume and the presence of Laura. She isn't dead. Diane Redfern, decimated by a shotgun blast to the face, was the victim, not Laura Hunt.

I've always loved this moment. It's pure cinematic magic.

My story centers around an estranged father who died of a heart attack and a young son who goes to his father's apartment in search of some lost connection. One night while looking through his father's things, he falls asleep and is awakened by the smell of perfume. A young woman, Melanie, a University of Toronto English major, is in the apartment, her hair wet with rain. The protagonist discovers not only were she and his father lovers but she was also tutoring him, teaching him some of the classics of literature. The father, an immigrant, had always wanted to appreciate some of the "essentials."

This latter plot wrinkle was inspired by Bernard Malamud. In "A Summer's Reading," George Stoyonovich, unemployed and feeling disrespected, tells the neighborhood that he's going to read 100 books over the summer. This gives him dignity and the respect of his community, but soon it's discovered by his sister and his neighbor Mr. Cattanzara that George has been doing nothing toward this goal. Shamed and seeking redemption the story ends with George heading to the library: "There were books all over the place, wherever he looked, and though he was struggling to control an inward trembling, he easily counted off a hundred, then sat down at a table to read."

In my story, Stan seeks a father's legacy, what is he passing down to the son, if anything? He finds it. An overdue library book, one of the essentials, his father was reading with his tutor. Melanie had a key to the apartment and was there to find the book and return it to the library. Stan promises to do so, but he wants to read it first. In a clear echo of Malamud, "Essentials" ends: "She smiled and walked to the upholstered chair. When he looked up she was gone. He started reading."
The father's legacy is secure: the son will inherit a father's love for literature.

Scaffolding gives writers ways to enhance a story's trajectory, to shape where a plot might go. It's a dialogic practice that enhances an appreciation for the past work and your own.

Exercises:

1) Visits: write a two-person scene. Character A sits in a park and is confronted by/meets a stranger, Character B. See what emerges. Rewrite the scene, only this time make Character B somebody Character A knows (a brother, a sister, a former lover, a grade school bully)
2) Peripheral narration: write a scene where Character A observes something wild and eccentric that Character B is doing. Have Character A begrudgingly admire what they see. Re-write the scene and have Character A annoyed by what they see. Write the scene a third time and have the peripheral narrator emerge from the shadows and insert their will in the scene. What emerges? Note all the differing choices you made and the resulting outcomes.
3) Scaffolding: take a scene or a moment from an antecedent text. Invert some of its paradigms (gender roles, narrative outcomes) and see what you can create dialogically. Have fun and experiment. Take risks.
4) Family dynamics: a set of car keys sits on a kitchen table. Character A wants to talk to her sister and doesn't want her to get the keys and leave. Character B wants to grab the keys (they're hers afterall) and get out of the room as quickly as possible. The characters are at odds and have competing objectives. Write the scene, see what emerges.
5) Slice of life: take an actual experience you've had (working at a big box retail or grocery store, a coffee shop, time spent in the military) and lean into the dirty realism of it. If none of these resonate for you then recall a Holiday event (Thanksgiving, a Fourth of July bash) or a rite of passage (learning to drive a car, going to prom, graduating from high school) and

tell the scene slant. Pick a moment outside the ordinary, where things went slightly awry. Let us feel the immediacy of it. Place us in the moment with all its blemishes.

6) The epiphany. Write through it. In other words, start your scene with the revelation and then go on to explore how the radiant moment was a false insight. Or, write a scene with an ironic epiphany. A character comes to a false knowledge (we readers recognize it as false but Character A, because of the trauma they've undergone, does not). Write this narrative in first person ("I" point-of-view), and then rewrite it in limited third.
7) Write a quest narrative (300 words or less) like a fable or fairytale. Use a telling voice and little dialogue. Rely on summary. Now rewrite that quest narrative focusing only on a single scene. Expand a specific moment by leaning into the action-film elements: light, time, dialogue, staging (where characters are in relation to each other and the props that are in play) and setting (to create mood and psychological subtext). Rely on the art of inference. What's implied, what are we not seeing/hearing?

CHAPTER THREE

Counterpointed Plotting

A lot of fictional stories *are* battlegrounds.

Indebted to the melodramatic imagination, literary stories often involve dynamics of power: who has control over whom; who abuses it; who uses it wisely. Stories of victimization grip us. We know that abuse from those in authority (teachers over children; a coach over players; a mother over a son) does all too often happen. When I was twelve years old the story "The Test" by Angelica Gibbs had a profound impact on me. A twenty-seven year-old African American woman needs to get her driver's license for the job she has with a privileged white family. During the road test, the examiner "tests" her, making a series of derogatory remarks such as, "Old enough to have quite a flock of pickaninnies, eh?" The commentary escalates, until Marian, no longer able to take the degradation, pushes back with a "damn you," and the examiner fails her, "[making] four very black crosses at random in the squares on Marian's application blank."

This story was originally published in the pages of *The New Yorker* in 1940 and I don't think a month goes by where I don't think about that story. It was a game changer for me. The extent of that kind of meanness, that kind of abuse of power, and racial targeting I was not aware existed until Gibbs showed the way.

Years later Sandra Cisneros does her own variation on this theme in the powerfully poignant "Eleven" where a white teacher, Mrs. Price, singles out a Latina girl, Rachel, on her birthday, making her claim ownership of a red sweater, "all raggedy and old" that clearly isn't hers and has a "sleeve that smells like cottage cheese." The teacher's assumptions are based on class: this sweater "all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope" must belong to one of her not-so-well-off kids. She embarrasses Rachel, and when the truth is revealed that it's not Rachel's sweater, Mrs Price fails to apologize.

That narrative loose string still haunts me everytime I re-read "Eleven," the failure of an authority figure to acknowledge and empathize with one of the students in the classroom.

Perhaps American writers, because we are a relatively young country, often tell stories of lost idealism, the veil of innocence being lifted to reveal what's underneath: corruption, decay, unkindness.

But battleground stories *aren't the only* stories to tell.

Charles Baxter, inspired by the work of the American stage, champions, in *Burning Down the House,* narratives of counterpointed characterization. Here the focus isn't on some kind of end game: who's

going to triumph, who's going to lose? Who's the protagonist, who's the antagonist? But instead these narratives spin around the connections and disconnects between two people, and ultimately we're asked what's emerging here? What's leaking free from the armor almost all characters wear?

In theater, acting is often seen as structured improvisation. Actors have a script, but how they say what they say changes moment-to-moment depending on what their scene partner is giving them. Similarly in counterpointed character stories, the writer needs to follow the impulses of what each character puts forward, and that will form the basis of the story's narrative arc. The end game isn't so much to win, but to be understood. Life isn't always a contest.

I love these kinds of stories.

In Norman Jewison's In *The Heat of the Night* (1967) the narrative has its fill of high-octane melodrama: a businessman, promising to bring a much-needed factory to Sparta, Mississippi, is murdered; a group of rednecks with a Confederate symbol on their car track and plan to possibly murder Virgil Tibbs; a white man Endicott (a plantation owner and resident bigot) slaps Tibbs in the face and Tibbs slaps him back; and a final arrest and shooting occurs on the pre-dawn streets. But underneath these pyrotechnics is a character-driven story as two men (one Black, one white; one big city Northerner, one rural country southerner; one college educated and nuanced with forensics, the other two-fisted and full of street smarts) tangle with each other, argue, but find connections among all their moments of disconnect, discovering a common humanity.

Sheriff Gillespie begrudgingly learns to lean on Virgil's talent to help save the town and the promise of a new factory; and Virgil, in his pursuit of the bigoted Endicott, becomes painfully aware of his own prejudices and biases. In the end the men admire one another, and in a wonderful flipping of the Pullman conductor archetype, the white sheriff (played by Rod Steiger) carries the bags of the Black detective (played by Sidney Poitier) to the train.

A perfect ending to what the true journey of the characters within the larger plot is all about.

Endings

Speaking of endings, whether it be a battleground story or one driven by counterpointed characterization, they should grow organically out of the journeys our central characters take. Moreover, they should illustrate subtle change, change that's believable within the range of possibilities for the protagonist in the given circumstances of the story.

Over the years, as an editor and reader of fiction, I've come across many satisfied endings to stories. Here's a list of "moves" I've seen again and again, resolutions that grow from the crisis and turmoil a lead character is placed in and subjected to:

- The precipice, freeze-frame ending (a personal fave of mine). A character ends in the midst of things. Stories often begin in the midst of things so why not end in them? A character picks up a rock, ready to throw it, end (Raymond Carver's "Viewfinder"); an ex-school teacher holds a pen over a blank page of a Yearbook, thinking of what to say to a woman whose life, in some ways, he tried to destroy (Tom Perrotta in *Election*);
- Image/Resonance (the lyrical poetry move: a story concludes with a powerful image that resonates back to the emotional shores of the story);
- Dialogue (perhaps double-voiced): a move that creates poignancy or a kind of haunting call back. In my story "Ossining 1919" adolescent James Cagney ends things by saying "Ready." As the catcher, he's telling the umpire after a fracas at home plate and adjusting his mask that he's ready for the game to continue, but he's also telling readers he's ready for a vision he's just had about being an artist and moving ahead without his father;
- Situational irony. In Susan Jackson Rodgers's collection *The Ex-Boyfriend in Aisle 6,* a woman, alone, is aware of a dark presence outside, an ex bent on hurting her, and she arranges in neat rows the spices in her spice rack, seeking order in the chaos;
- Revelation/Epiphany: the classic Joycean move in which a character has an intense, religious-like feeling or insight, and comes to knowledge (often an unveiling, discomforting discoveries for youth);
- A False Insight: a kind of anti-epiphany story in which the lesson to be learned goes haywire and the character learns a lie (Hemingway's "Indian Camp" in which the boy *knows* he'll never die is a thwarted coming-of-age story);
- The Inflation/Deflation Ending (hope vs despair: here's what I wish for vs. here's what I know is true). Many chapters in Anthony Doerr's *All Light We Cannot See* end on this melody line. Julie Orringer in "Notes to Sixth-Grade Self" inverts or at least plays with this paradigm:

  > He looks down into his lap and you understand that the boy is him. When he raises his eyes, his expression tells you that despite the dress, despite the hybrid peas, things are not going to change at school or Miss Maggie's. He will not take walks with you at recess or sit next to you at McDonald's. You can see that he is apologizing for this, and you can choose to accept it or not.
  >
  > Get to your feet and pull yourself up straight; raise your chin as your mother has shown you to do. Adjust the straps of your sandals, and make sure your halter is tied tight. Then ride bikes with Eric Cassio until dark.

- Narrative Telling. Not quite an epiphany, but a moment where the writer tells us something significant instead of showing us;
- A musical coda or rhyme back to something (an image/sound/action) used earlier. In Joyce's "The Dead" the snow tapping at the window echoes back to the action of Michael Furey throwing rocks at Gretta Conroy's window;
- The non-ending ending or the here we go again ending, as the quarrel or conflict continues (see Dorothy Parker's biting "Here We Are").

Case Study #3: "Garbage Night at the Opera"

Valerie Fioravanti's "Garbage Night at the Opera" is a beautifully crafted tale of counterpointed characterization. It's a rite of passage story. Massimo, an immigrant from Italy and a single parent, wants to educate his daughter Franca on an aspect of his cultural heritage: they're going to see a production of *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan.

The narration informs us of Massimo's other attempts to keep his past alive: To recapture the beauty of Ventozza, the town he hails from, Massimo ran "a creeping vine along his fire escape to introduce some green," but "[T]he firemen brought ladders and chopped it away with their axes. They said it was a safety violation, wrote him a ticket, and warned him not to do it again."

Sadly, further attempts to acculturate his daughter to Italy are also thwarted. When they arrive at the Met they discover the show's sold out and can't purchase a ticket.

Fioravanti then flips the traditional dynamics between a father and a daughter. Franca protects *him* from having "security" called in. Massimo isn't happy about it: "He doesn't like it when she has to speak for him, but strangers often misunderstand him."

So where's the story going to go next, what else is going to emerge? What might it pull out from the shadows, the hiding places between these two characters?

After witnessing a so-so puppet performance in Central Park, Massimo gets lost on his way home. The "outing" for his daughter appears to be going all awry. But then two treasures are found: a discarded mahogany dresser and a thrown away bicycle with a busted rim. Franca wants the bike and Dad fights an obstreperous neighbor for her right to keep it. In a final, double-voiced moment Fioravanti writes, "They have both chosen well."

How so? Dad plans to fix the bicycle for his daughter so that she will be able to more fully participate in childhood and become Americanized. By contrast, Franca, in carrying the bike herself, allows Dad to keep the dresser so that he can fix it, sell it, and perhaps pre-order tickets for the opera, and thus pass down some of his cultural heritage.

Case Study #4: "The Capsule"

Joseph Helmreich's "The Capsule" is a tight little story that deals with a different kind of counterpoint, the shadow shelf. Our protagonist is suddenly pushed back into, what we later will

learn to be, an irretrievable past. A time capsule has been retrieved from the Downsville Dam's spillway.

It's Quinn's capsule and years ago she died in a fire that killed her and eleven other classmates. The media wants to open the capsule and our protagonist is asked to do the honors. The dramatics of the situation places him in two spaces at once: "I feel guilty talking about this to Sheila. I know that's ridiculous; it's twelve-year-old me and a twelve-year-old-girl. Yet sometimes I wonder if that fact itself isn't why I try not to think about Quinn. It feels inappropriate. I was so powerfully drawn to her and when I remember her, that power returns and, as a married father of two, it feels shameful. I remind myself that I'm not perceiving her through my adult eyes, but through the eyes of myself as a child and that the feelings, too, are just being borrowed from him. But it does little to ease the discomfort. Maybe what I'm really hiding from is something more inscrutable: that I'm in love with a ghost."

He exists in a state of doubleness. And the counterpoints are doubled: the protagonist vis-a-vis himself and vis-a-vis his memories of Quinn.

Prior to the opening of the capsule he has several retrospective backstories, remembering Quinn scraping a chalk outline with a small rock of a dead deer. She's an enigma, eyes "radiant with mischief"; he's trying to understand her and his attraction to her; but this isn't going to be a simple story of coming to terms. Instead of understanding the present through the past, Helmreich, in a stunning reversal, leaves us with more questions than answers.

"The Capsule" is a powerful thwarted quest story. Sometimes the most interesting characters we can write are those that can't find what they most want.

Exercises:

1) One of the dangers of writing a counterpointed characterization story is slipping into stereotypes (the liberal versus the conservative; the feminist versus the traditionalist; the intellectual versus the UAW member). To avoid this pitfall choose two types to throw into a situation, and before you start writing make a list for each character that complicates who they are. Perhaps the feminist enjoys Hallmark Christmas movies; the liberal enjoys his Friday afternoons at the gun range. Seek out the contradictions; the consistent inconsistencies we are all made of. And then write. Do not reduce your character to a single truth.
2) Character A meets Character B at a park. B has a story to tell. A decides to listen.
3) Character A and Character B get into a fender bender. Rather than sit in their separate vehicles and wait for the police to arrive they talk. What emerges?

4) Character A hasn't seen her father in over five years. She tracks him down to a small-town high school where he works as a janitor. She confronts him. What might they say to each other?
5) Character A returns to high school for her ten-year reunion. She has a job that makes her happy, is married, and seeks out a teacher (Character B) who underestimated her, said she'd never amount to much. When A meets up with B, B says she's so proud of A's success. "I always knew you'd make it," B says. A doesn't know what to say to this or do. What does she do?
6) A meets B at a coffee shop. A likes B but wants B to know that she wants B to be in the friend Zone. B feels differently. Write the scene.
7) A family member (B) arrives at A's doorstep. They haven't seen each other in five years. B has in tow a young child (C) and wants to take up residence for a few weeks. A is about to have their girlfriend (D) move in with them. Write the scene.
8) A new boss (B) calls you into their office.
9) Your best friend (B) decides to start dating your ex (C). How does that work out? What emerges?
10) You sit at the breakfast table wondering where Dad is. It's a Saturday morning. Mom says he needed to get away for a while. Write the scene.
11) Junior High: A is bullying B. C (you) decides to stop it.
12) Junior High: A is bullying B. C (you) decides not to intervene.
13) Nine years old, soccer. Your best friend (A) doesn't pick you for her team.
14) A has to tell B some sort of emotionally charged news.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Art of Showing

When I was twenty-four years old I was a graduate student, studying creative writing at Kansas State and I was thrown into the classroom as a teacher for the first time in my life. I was scared. We had mentors who prepped us each week for our classes and the theory behind our composition teaching, or "personal essay writing," was to move the students from "sight to insight." Underpinning this school of thought was the principle of "show don't tell." Don't generalize a feeling with a summary sentence or two, put us in the immediacy of the moment, and rely on scenic detail to ground us in the real. Earn your moments.

Thus, the first day of teaching I discussed the five elements of a scene. Obviously, those principles cross over to fiction writing, but they aren't the only way to write a story. Here are the essential five:

1) Setting. Whether it's a rain-slicked city street, a sun-drenched day at the beach, or the bright-lit alleys and clatter of pins at a bowling alley, a sense of place can provide mood and atmosphere, giving a story nuance and the necessary building blocks for world building. How is a story set in a city going to differ from a story set in a small town? How might events unfold differently between two people having a heated conversation in a coffee shop versus in a hospital waiting room? Setting matters. It sets the stage. Two people sitting on a living room couch creates a different vibe from two people sitting on a bench in a museum taking in an Edward Hopper painting. The point is that setting will affect writerly and character choices. Our environments can help define us. Snow for James Joyce in *The Dead* represents death and a mood of resignation and a sense of loss. I use snow settings in many of my stories and for me it signifies what it did for Joyce but it also signifies nostalgia, idealism and hope. David Lynch, in his films, often plays with setting in contrapuntal ways: a bright sun lit day sets up an idyllic expectation but then Lynch undercuts it with his next shot selection: birds chirping for food in a nest. On closer inspection, the birds aren't real, but clearly mechanical representations. Lynch's point: the peaceful contentment of our suburban life is fraught with fraud.
2) Props, costumes and staging. What we see on our fictional stage can define character, and the world we're building (including the genre we're in). Phasers, rolling tumbleweed, a fedora places us within the realms of differing genres. Moreover if a character drives a Mercedes as opposed to a rusty Yaris that tells us something about that person's privilege and status. If another character eats a hamburger with his gloves on we might wonder why he doesn't want to leave fingerprints anywhere. A woman, while talking to a man, intermittently pulls her cardigan sweater more tightly in on herself, perhaps because she is aware of the tyranny of his gaze and being ogled. She's uncomfortable. Props and costuming lead to the readers making inferences about the world of your story, and this is a strong component of the contract between you and your audience in the art of showing. Of course you can play with

these expectations and thwart them. Peter Falk, as Columbo, works the humility topos card, with his rumpled raincoat, scuffed up shoes, messy hair, and hunched walk. He wants the killer to underestimate him while building his case and then catching the killer flat-footed. Staging allows the reader to understand where the characters are vis-a-vis each other (one is in the kitchen, saying she wants a trial separation, while the other one stands in the living room watching the TV with the sound off) and this provides emotional impact. Car scene, staging A: a husband drives, complaining about their sex life, and the wife looks away, leaning as much as possible into the locked passenger door, head against the glass. Car scene, staging B: a wife drives, the husband shares how much fun it was showering together this morning, "we need to do that more often," and she smiles when suddenly the sun rises over the curve of the hill. He reaches in the glove box for her sunglasses and places them gently on her face.

3) Dialogue and the Art of Subtext. How a character speaks and what they speak about defines them in your narrative arc. What do they want? How do they go after it? What are their objectives in the scene? What adjustments to these objectives do they make as the scene unfolds? Objectives can be anything from Character A trying to persuade Character B that they're right or they need to be understood or forgiven. Scenes between characters often involve tensions, moving between moments of connect and disconnect. Characters in a show-don't-tell narrative don't directly reveal what they want. Scene work often relies on inference and the Hemingway iceberg, his belief in revealing only an eighth of what's at stake and leaving the other seven-eighths submerged for readers to tease out of the story's dialogue, conflict, and symbols. His "Hills Like White Elephants" is a classic example: Jig and her lover have a heated conversation at a train depot—he wants her to let some "air" in; she wants him to "please please please please please please please stop talking." The repetition of "please" lets us in on her emotional space (exhausted by and gaining distance from him) and the story's title and mix of fecund versus dry imagery leads us to underscore what they might be talking about: an abortion. Hemingway never uses that word, but we piece the clues together. After all, just what does the metaphor of a white elephant represent?
4) Characters. The most fun part of world building is the people you place on your stage. What is their relationship (lovers; father/son; mother/daughter; sisters; teacher/student)? How would you describe the dynamics of power between them (equals; abusive; patronizing; controlling)? Within the given circumstances of your story what do these characters want? Are they "I" characters or "me" characters? Do they act on the world or are they acted upon? Do they have agency or are they victims? Most characters shift about within this continuum, and are not placed strongly on one defining pole. However, in the world of melodrama we do have strong characters, antagonists, irrational villains who do evil/mean/cruel things. But as I mentioned in chapter three, in many literary stories the old-fashioned antagonist has disappeared for a different kind of story, one of counterpoints or foils. What do these two characters pull out of each other? What's discovered in the hiding spots of identity? What's emerging here? And of course, for the writer, there's all kinds of

additional micro-detailing of character at your disposal: class, age, belief systems; race; gender; orientation; identity. These components will help define the characters navigating the spaces of your fictional world. One final thought: you may want to jot down a list of three adjectives to define your character before writing a scene: tenacious; passive aggressive; pouty; generous; knit-picky; etc. And don't forget, we all contain multitudes and are bundles of contradictions: a punk rock guitarist could enjoy polka music or Tchaikovsky. Just saying.

5) Time and Light. Because showing stories rely so much on immediacy and are grounded in what a character is experiencing they usually take place over a very short period: twenty minutes to an hour. And because this kind of fictional world is highly visible it relies on the spaces between light and dark. Is it night time with a few office lights glowing and steam rising off manhole covers or is it daylight with the sounds of children playing on the structures in a park as two people sit on a bench throwing bits of bread to the pigeons?

The problem with the iceberg theory of writing is that sometimes what's underneath the surface isn't a hulking seven-eighths of subtextual richness, a heavy psychological iceberg, but a lack of weight and substance. In other words our iceberg is nothing but thinning ice cubes. What the hell? We readers have to put in *this* amount of investigative inference to learn that Character A is envious of Character B? Three pages of hints for something I figured out in half-a-page? Is the effort worth the outcome?

Years ago, in a workshop, a fellow student held up a few pages from a story of mine. He had put large X's on my yarn, and like a detective studying a lie detector printout said I can tell all of this in one paragraph. "Read Cheever."

I was pissed. Needless to say, I went to the library, found the red paperback of Cheever's stories and was enthralled by his command of voice and his ability to *tell* a story.

The Art of Telling

Steven Schwartz, a writer I greatly admire, once told me that every story has an inner and outer story and you as a writer have to figure out what kind of story you're telling and what kind of writer you are. The inner journey is one of reflection/introspection/backstory and the outer often involves a more present timeline. When I started writing literary stories I'd say I was 80-20 (show versus tell); now, I'm more 60–40). Early in Philip Roth's career he was much more of a "show" writer (look at *Goodbye, Columbus* and his short story "The Conversion of the Jews"); by the end of his career he was much more of a discursive writer (compare the short novels *Indignation* and *Nemesis*). Your niche will evolve over time and you will find it in the spaces between these two poles.

In my early writing life I relied a lot on the Hemingway model. Frankly it was easier. Raised on films and television, I was used to showing a story, screenplays as fiction, drawing things out from the

doubleness inside of dialogue and the power of inference. Moreover, the world was extremely confusing to me and the art of showing didn't force me to explore in depth how people feel or navigate their thoughts about the world and its complexities. My characters could be in the dark as much as me, the writer, and what they understood could be gleamed in glimpses or dim glimmerings.

But as I grew older and read fiction by legendary authors like Cheever, Bernard Malamud and Alice Munro, I found myself wanting to tell a story as much as show one. One of the advantages of a telling voice is world building. It gives you a much bigger canvas to tell a story; you are no longer in the world of immediacy, three or four scenes, and a timeline that takes place in twenty minutes to an hour. Nobel Prize–winning author Alice Munro writes long, expansive stories. How does she build her worlds? Munro's telling voice juggles generations, different timelines, invokes other discourses like a poem from another era; newspaper writings; diary entries, etc. Her narratives rely more on half-scenes or summary scenes and can cover years. Many of her texts are polyvocal, following more than one perspective or "central intelligence." Finally, most of her stories center around relationships of power: parent/child; boss/employee; teacher/student; husband/wife; Canadian/new immigrant; etc.

Steven Schwartz in his brilliant collection *Little Raw Souls* balances the bigger canvas of telling with showing us anywhere from 3 to 11 scenes per story.

Expository Directness

Bernard Malamud's story, "A Choice of Profession," about a professor's failings to feel and truly listen, showcases direct exposition at the front of the story's four section starts. Repeatedly, Malamud gives us a sense of what the character's thinking and feeling, in particular his aching longing and loneliness, his obsessions and weaknesses. The story is essentially three or four core scenes surrounded by narrative compression. This compression allows Malamud to travel in time and gives the story a repetition with variation model (the student—Mary Lou Miller—confesses something to the professor; he can't handle it—three times, he fails her.). The story begins: "Cronin after discovering that his wife, Marge, had been two-timing him with a friend, suffered months of crisis. He had loved Marge and jealousy lingered unbearably. He lived through an anguish of degrading emotions, and a few months after his divorce, left a well paying job in Chicago to take up teaching." No repressed exposition here.

Instead, like Anton Chekhov, Malamud quickly establishes a context for the story, the given circumstances for its lead character. Loneliness pervades. The second section has yet another "summary bridge": "It took Cronin a surprisingly long time to get over having been let down by Mary Lou. He had built her up in his mind as a woman he might want to spend some time with, and the surprise of her revelation, and his disillusionment, lingered so long he felt unsettled." The

psychological subtext is laid bare for us—it's not distilled through the subtextual icebergs of action and inference. And having exposition at the front end of each section, moves the story quickly along, compressing the need for a lot of scene work. Recall my discussion of Cheever and the suggestion a student gave me to cut a three-page scene into a paragraph or long sentence.

The Habitual Tense

A language tool in a long story writer's tool box is the habitual tense, creating a sense of the ongoing, a ritualized routine that gets broken to allow the extraordinary to take place. Here's another example, from a "Choice of Profession" by my favorite writer, Malamud:

> He continued to be interested in her and she occasionally would wait at his desk after class and walk with him in the direction of his office. He often thought she had something personal to say to him, but when she spoke it was usually to say that one or another poem had moved her; her taste, he thought, was a little too inclusive. Mary Lou rarely recited in class. He found her a bit boring when they talked for more than five minutes, but that secretly pleased him because the attraction to her was quite strong and this was a form of insurance. One morning, during a free hour, he went to the registrar's office on some pretext or other, and looked up her records. Cronin was surprised to discover she was twenty-four and only a first-year student. Because they were so close in age, as well as for other reasons, he decided to ask her out. That same afternoon Mary Lou knocked on his office door and came in to see him about a quiz he had just returned. She had got a low C and it worried her. Cronin lit her cigarette and noticed that she watched him intently, his eyes, mustache, hands, as he explained what she might have written on her paper. They were sitting within a foot of one another, and when she raised both arms to fix her bun, the imprint of her large nipples on her dress caught his attention. It was during this talk in the office that he suggested they go for a drive one evening at the end of the week. Mary Lou agreed, saying maybe they could stop off somewhere for a drink, and Cronin, momentarily hesitating, said he thought they might. All the while they had been talking she was looking at him with some inner place in herself, and he had the feeling he had been appraising her superficially.

This paragraph, about a relationship of power, is amazing. It does so many things well. Up until the move of "one morning," it is in the "habitual tense," the actions are ongoing. Note words such as "continued" and "occasionally" in the first sentence; and "often" and "usually" in the second sentence. These are ongoing conversations over a span of time. The transition to "one morning" focuses on a specific day without opting for a scene. Instead, Malamud places us in a summary scene, as he quickly in sequential order informs us of what happened (and here he allows himself to be vague: "some pretext or other" and "as well as for other reasons"); next, the sequential summary moves from "one morning" to "that same afternoon," and here Malamud, for purposes of economy, eschews direct dialogue for summary dialogue (note how much time is saved by not being specific about what he told her "she might have written on her paper"); like a solid scene however,

there is a turning point or deflection ("the imprint of her large nipples on her dress caught his attention") that affects choices made; and the sequence ends with a wonderfully strange insight that's told to us: "he had the feeling he had been appraising her superficially." This is narrative telling at its finest.

Case Study #5: the Art of Juggling the Inner (Telling) and Outer (Showing) in "The Horse Burier"

Steven Schwartz's "The Horse Burier" does a brilliant job of time juggling, moving constantly between the present time story and a series of past remembrances or retrospective expository flourishes. The story focuses on an estranged father/son relationship and their helping two elderly women bury a beloved horse.

The story begins with a destabilizing condition and expository directness:

> The sisters wanted to bury Lulu on their farm, so they called Henry's son, Landon, to do the job. Landon owned and operated a front-end loader with a backhoe. He mostly worked construction but took side jobs too, including horse burial. He worked nights and weekends to support his ex-wife and two kids. Several years ago he'd gotten into trouble gambling beyond his means—way beyond them—and Henry hoped that after a divorce, bankruptcy, and visits from mirthless men with snake-eyed determination his son's problems were now behind him.

So much is laid out for us here. This opening doesn't rely on inference. Instead, an inner story is quickly pushed to the center of our narrative and we suspect hard feelings and disappointments bubbling between father and son.

As the story's arc plays out, Schwartz constantly moves from present time actions (conversations, and the burying the horse) to narrative backstories (Landon hitting a water main and his insurance premiums skyrocketing; the death of Henry's wife Meg and her vague final request, "Promise me!"; Henry's loneliness following her death, walking about an empty house talking to himself; Landon's wife asking for full custody of her kids; and Landon's inability to pay for his kids' soccer registrations).

These inner and outer stories continue to weave together until we reach a brilliant precipice ending. But just prior to that ending, Schwartz's timeline dynamics jump to a daring flashforward: "Was it wonder, Henry would ask himself when the ground turned hard with the first frost and the sisters died within months of each other and their land was sold off after a contentious probate hearing involving dubious relations who claimed to know them, was it any wonder that he would look up and see the bucket above him ready to deposit its payload."

Wow. Just between us, this is one of my all-time favorite stories I've had the pleasure and privilege of publishing.

Exercises:

A) Showing:

1) Write a scene set in an automobile where a couple is breaking up. Neither one of them says it's over directly, but through inference and silences and stillness you convey the idea to the reader.
2) Contrast dialogue with inner monologue as a checker at HyVee deals with a disgruntled customer. The checker says one thing, but their monologue says something else.
3) A character walks out to an old barn that's weather worn and falling apart. Through what the character observes we discover that they are grieving over a loved one.
4) Use a rain-soaked setting to suggest sadness. Rewrite the scene and suggest the opposite. Never once tell us the character is happy or sad.
5) Write a moment of immediacy (playing the trumpet; running a race; driving a car) and expand time by adding details and lengthening your sentences.

B) Telling:

1) Explore the ongoing in the following teaser: "Every Tuesday a group of actors meet at the local coffee shop. . . ." Suggest a series of ongoing behaviors, and then transition to "on this one particular Tuesday Susan announces . . ." Now, tunnel down to the mic drop moment and see what emerges.
2) Boldly write a paragraph or two telling us directly what's troubling a character. Summarize. Don't leave anything to inference.
3) Find a rich scene written by a genre writer you admire and rewrite it, scaling it back, sliding it into half-scene mode. Pair it down to a work of narrative telling. Use compression and convert most of the dialogue to summary.

CHAPTER FIVE

Characterization and Method Writing

What is it I want?

What am I willing to do to get it?

These are the central questions an actor asks herself while doing scene work. It involves action, verbs, seeking your goals, and these tactics shift during a scene, adjustments are made to respond to and perhaps challenge what your scene partner is giving you.

Writers can adapt this technique to their prose to give scenes levels, to increase tensions between characters, to move more freely and dramatically between moments of connect and disconnect.

In almost every chapter of Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House*, he encourages artists to avoid the over-determined. His chapter on narrative dysfunction seeks to give characters agency; his emphasis on defamiliarization is on finding the "moderately strange" within the ordinary; he dislikes the preponderance of epiphanic endings because they become too formulaic, an easy narrative solution for tired writers; and counterpointed characters should never represent ideas but exist as fully realized people, bumping up against each other and eliciting honest responses.

Actors live in subtexts. They want to make the "hot" choice, the unexpected within the expected. The best performances are never over-scripted but full of complex, shifting tonalities.

Sean Penn lives truthfully in imaginary circumstances. A proponent of the Method, Penn said on *Inside the Actor's Studio* in 1999, that his acting approach seeks the "uncommon thought in the common matter." Penn called up a poem by Charles Bukowski in which a young seven-year old boy is looking from a train window, watching the Pacific Ocean rush by. The boy utters to a traveling companion, "It's not beautiful." The man, taken aback, realizes for the first time that he too doesn't find it beautiful. We're conditioned to believe that oceans are beautiful. But actors break through our conditioning to transcend the all-too typical and find the new response, the unpredictable that is also somehow inevitable. That's living truthfully, not following the all too familiar. Penn, indirectly, is reinforcing Baxter's notions of defamiliarization.

So, how does a writer take an acting approach to his scene work and let his characters follow impulses and freely breathe? Ron Carlson has brilliantly argued that dialogue isn't just exposition, a means of moving a story forward. Dialogue is the very stuff of individualism, allowing each character to have his/her moment free of the controlling voice of the narrator/author. Carlson believes that characters speak from their own place and this can take a story in unprecedented directions. Invest in that freedom.

I have written so many stories in which characters surprised me by saying something through dialogue that took the plot or the moment in a fresh, new direction. Be open to those surprises. Stay in uncertainties and listen to the choices your characters will help you make. Explore and enjoy the shifting tones that dynamic scene work inhabits.

Writing the Back Story

The following is a list of help you discover the internal life of your character. Much of what you write down under these steps won't find its way into your story, but these explorations will give you a better sense of who your character is.

1) Purpose: What does your character want? To find love? To be accepted?
2) What are your character's hopes, dreams, and fears?
3) Stat sheet: age, sex, race, height, weight. Shoe size? What physical attribute in himself is your character most proud of? What physical attribute in himself is your character least proud of? Favorite foods?
4) Belief systems: list 4-5 of your character's values. Include political leanings.
5) Sexual history: list. Married? Sexual orientation?
6) Medical history: list.
7) Me vs I? Is your character passive or active, a victim or full of agency? Where on this continuum are they?
8) Relationships: Mom, Dad, spouse, siblings (if any). Explore. Relationships with friends, then and now.
9) Name a book your character read recently and liked? Why? Other hobbies. Avocations? Favorite movies, bands. Describe.
10) Where does your character live? City, country? Describe the dwelling (a basement apartment, a small ranch house). Where has your character lived before (locations and dwellings)?
11) Occupation: describe. What does your character like about her job? What does she not like about it?
12) List 5 vivid visual memories your character has right now. Images. Snapshots.
13) List 3 turning point experiences (epiphanies) your character has gone through.
14) In terms of personality, what does your character like most about herself? What does she dislike most about herself? What is she doing about what she dislikes?
15) What would your character like for Christmas (or a differing religious holiday)?
16) When was the last time your character cried? Why?
17) Does your character have any pleasures that make him feel guilty?Cigarettes and/or alcohol? Enjoyment of pornography and/or reality TV programs?

18) Name or breakdown for us an inconsistency within the consistency of your character's back story.
19) Why do you (the writer) empathize with this character?
20) Write a quick bio (25 words or less) to introduce your character before a formal gathering.

A caveat: use this checklist to get to know your character; don't use it to over-determine plot choices; don't write towards the back stories you've created; use them to underscore present scenes you're writing. For example, maybe when your character was four years old he had an abusive father who held him over the balcony seven floors up by his ankles. This is an incredibly dramatic backstory, but perhaps it doesn't fit directly into the story you're writing. Don't share it with us; keep it as a secret between you and your character, but use the emotional impact of that secret to provide subtext for a dramatic moment you *are sharing* with us in your story: your lead character gets into a heated argument with an abusive father who is yelling at his own daughter for dropping a fly ball during a softball game.

The Art of Subtext and the Three S's

Staging

This according to Charles Baxter involves "putting characters in specific strategic positions in the scene so that some unvoiced nuance is revealed."

Imagine that you, the writer, are a director of a play, and you are using blocking for two reasons: to reveal the inner life of your characters and to keep your audience engaged. Does one character move toward the other on a given line or action? Does the other move away or cross to an object in the room? Does one character try to touch the other character, to help land a line? Or does that character touch the other while stating the opposite of what she means? Again, Baxter on staging: "It shows us how the characters are behaving, and it shows us what they cannot say through the manner in which they say what they *can say."*

Stakes

Characters want things: respect, love, to be understood, happiness. Literary stories are often about desire. This is what creates urgency. Acting Coach Sanford Meisner defined acting as "living truthfully in imaginary circumstances." Living truthfully involves being present and following authentic impulses. For the writer, give your characters the space to live and freely breathe.

Moreover, the space they inhabit is fraught with "life and death stakes," either real or figuratively. Losing a job; getting a medical diagnosis; discovering your spouse loves someone else.

Sometimes characters want the wrong things. George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* wants to be a great man, to make his mark on the world, and fails, initially, to realize the more quiet gifts his hard work and generosity have bestowed upon the inhabitants of Bedford Falls.

Sounds

In Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* James Tyrone and his wife Mary seem to have long parallel monologues in which they aren't really listening to one another; similarly Jamie and Edmund have moments where the younger brother listens but Jamie is off somewhere else, investing in wallowing regrets and self-hatred. Their dialogue is full of "unheard melodies."

These disparate melodies can be a powerful tool for writers, what Baxter calls "non-listening, selective listening, and parallel monologues." Self-absorption can also be present. Richard Belzer as Detective Munch on *Homicide: Life on the Street* was a character who enjoyed the sounds of his own words, as if everything is pithy and brilliant and deserving of our attention. When he speaks he wants strangers to eavesdrop and revel in his cleverness.

Beats, Objectives, Tactics and *On the Waterfront* (1954)

Beats is a Method acting term for breaking down the units of action in a scene. Beats can shift word to word. "Yeah, yeah" can have a beat change in the midst of the utterance if the first word's intentions differ from the second (say surprise versus resignation). A single word, such as "fantastic" can contain a beat if the melody of the word changes in the midst of its utterance (say from celebration to irony between the syllables). Most often when an actor marks the beats on a script, she's indicating shifts in emphasis, new tactics and objectives to be explored. She's building emotional levels that continue to probe the key questions, "what is it I want and what am I willing to do to get it?"

Many stories fail because they lack genuine honesty or surprise. Instead of characters playing tactics and a writer discovering all of the shifting tonalities, beats in the dialogue, limpid stories are full of flat scenes where nothing new or surprising is emerging.

Great actors never flat-line, they find varied levels, moments of syncopation playing up against a standard 4/4 beat. Nobody followed an impulse better than Marlon Brando. He was brilliant at choosing the right expression, gesture, and response for the right moment. In a tender scene from *On the Waterfront,* Terry Malloy (Brando) walks with Edie (Eva Marie Saint) out front of a church on the mean streets of Hoboken, New Jersey. He's somewhat shy and retreating, unsure of what to say. And then, in the midst of the conversation, Edie accidentally drops her glove and Brando picks it up, sits on a swing, removes bits of lint from the glove's fingers, and places it on his hand.

A "rehearsed accident" (Saint dropping the glove) turns into a magical impulse (a man wearing a woman's glove). Brando slides his hand *inside* her glove, leaving a personal trace within an object of clothing that isn't his. It's as if he's holding hands without holding hands. This is an inspired choice that shows Terry's tenderness, vulnerability, and repressed desire to hold her. And from there the dialogue becomes gentler between them, more poignant.

Let us slow down and look at the scene more closely now, at several beats, and how the actors' choices and Budd Schulberg's dialogue serve up dynamic complexities, shifts in objectives and emotional levels, that point a way for writers to write better scenes.

Terry and Edie's scene in On the Waterfront

The given circumstances: Malloy has been asked by the mob to keep an eye on Father Barry's protest movement with the waterfront workers. Malloy finds himself attracted to Edie (Eva Marie Saint), but feels tremendous guilt in being complicit in her brother's death. His objective is to find out just what she and the Father are organizing and to keep her distracted, directed away from the truth. Edie, a sheltered woman, desires to avenge her brother's death and to take her fight, with the help of the priest, to the streets. She wants answers from Terry and often has to press the issue, pushing away his various moments of subtle deflection ("Well, they play pretty rough around here," he says). However, she too finds herself, almost against her will, attracted to the ex-prizefighter and his child-like innocence. And what we have is a love scene.

Edie pushes past Terry's armor, his apparent mask of nonchalance, directly asking him, "which side are you with?" Terry smiles with an abashed joker grin and says, "Me, I'm with me." He once again makes light of the violence that surrounds them, but this time his efforts fail because of the intrusion of a local "juice head" who mumbles on and hints about Terry's involvement in Joey's death. "You remember," the rummy cryptically intones. Beat. This is the scene's emotional lynchpin. Even the loose change Terry tosses the rummy's way doesn't stop him from withering Terry with the cutting, "You don't buy me. You're still a bum."

Terry's response to this comment creates a major beat change. His emotional levels shift from nonchalance to hurt and a need to seek Edie's affirmation: "Who's calling me a bum." What's emerging here is his desire to be respected and a fear that maybe the "juice head" speaks the truth. Terry wants Edie's acceptance and love and that will be his objective throughout the remainder of the scene.

Edie slides her tactics back into interrogation mode with "What did that man mean just now," and Terry deflects with his "Don't pay no attention" repetitions, and then once again shifts tactics by telling her not to be afraid of him, "I won't bite ya," and expressing interest in her ambitions. It's at this moment that he picks up her scattered glove and places it on his hand while finding out about her sheltered past; her training with the nuns; and her desire to be a teacher. He praises her

ambitions trying to soothe and win her trust: "A teacher. That's very good. Personally, I admire brains. My brother Charlie was a very brainy guy. Had a couple of years of college."

His compliment, however, is turned back against him, as Edie issues a challenge, indirectly chastising his allegiances to the waterfront mob. "It isn't just brains. It's how you use them."
In good scene work, onstage or on the page, the moments vary between connect and disconnect, moments of understanding, communion versus moments of challenge and hurt.

Terry acquiesces, giving in slightly to her challenge. "Yeah, I get your thought," he replies, eyes somewhat faraway. Failing to win her trust through compliments about teachers, he changes tactics, creating different beats, returning to their shared past, and teases her, describing how her hair "looked like a hunk of rope" and how she had wires on her teeth and everything. "You were really a mess." She responds to his gentle put-downs with action, removing the glove from his hand, re-indicating a desire to leave, and he issues a halting apology: "I just mean to tell you that you grew up very nice."

After taking back the glove, Edie once again looks offscreen right, and exits the frame. Terry, uncertain, wonders if perhaps she too sees him as a bum.

This is the scene and the film's super-objective: self-respect.

How will she respond? Will she connect with him or push him away with words or silent action?

Desperately, he calls her, trying to halt her movement, his voice climbing an emotional register as he pleads, "You don't remember me do you?" Beat.

Finally, he's broken through to her.

Admissions by actors are almost always powerful moments. They make us all vulnerable: performers, viewers, readers. They strip us actors of our armor and disarm our fellow actors too. Terry's vulnerability here is on full display here. He drops his arm and reveals a fear of being invisible. This brings about an equally vulnerable admission from Edie: "I remember you the first moment I saw you." The tension is broken, he jokes about his nose, and the two connect as he crosses over to her and she offers up her philosophy about the need for teachers to treat troubled youngsters with more "patience" and "kindness." He needles her for her innocence and indirectly asks for a date. "What for?" she questions. With an inarticulate shrug he responds, "I don't know."

The beginning of their love is established in this "getting to know you" scene. Terry and Edie are vulnerable and open, letting genuine feelings in. For Terry the scene moves from denials; deflections; his need for approval (am I a bum?); his desire to win her by praising, teasing, holding onto the glove, and reminiscing about the past; an apology; his making himself vulnerable and

partially known; and finally, rather clumsily, asking her on a date. For Edie the scene moves from a desire to leave; interrogate; chastise and challenge; accept his apology; leave; admit a certain fondness for him; and question the "date" while leaving the possibility still open. She doesn't say no.

Exercises:

1) Write a scene of admit. A character reveals something that makes them vulnerable. Don't state what that something is directly but use the art of subtext.
2) Write a scene where characters A and B are talking in parallel monologues but not fully listening to each other.
3) A wants something from B. B isn't giving A what she wants. A shifts tactics three times. On the fourth try she wins or gives up (it's up to you). Write the scene. Make sure that in the dialogue A and B are playing objectives, under the surface of their words are strong verbs that are acting upon the other person. Use staging to bring the characters closer together or farther apart.
4) Write a scene where A tries to diminish B. Now rewrite the same scene where A is praising, almost toasting B.
5) Write a scene where the actions and words don't mesh. Someone is saying one thing but doing something else. Use staging to really bring home this disconnect.
6) Write a scene that escalates and ends with a reveal. Perhaps Character A takes a risk and Character B reciprocates with an equally daring risk. Or, two characters have a heated exchange. Stay in the room with them. Don't allow one to exit or cry to end the moment. Let the uncomfortableness of the moment truly take you somewhere surprising.

CHAPTER SIX

Character and Dialogue

I've found that most of you know how to write strong dialogue. We all watch a lot of serialized narratives on TV and devour all kinds of films from noirs to classic Hollywood to art cinema. We know the rhythm of our times and the beats with which people speak.

Dialogue can make a story pop, bringing characters fully to life. Direct dialogue grants them, as I've argued (taking my lead from Ron Carlson's *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*) in previous chapters, their own agency, their own spaces to speak from, giving us writers all kinds of narrative threads and impulses to follow. But we have to be listening.

The Five Modes of Fiction

Dialogue is probably the most important subset of the five modes.:

1) *Dialogue*. Conversations should involve conflict or something at stake, possibly a reveal. Not every scene is a battle. Often characters just want to be understood. Vulnerability plays a role here. Moreover, dialogue scenes should be full of uncertainty. Characters in a scene are often breaking from "fixed" roles of behavior, traveling somewhere they haven't gone before. Most moments of dialogue involve some kind of subtext (the unsaid) and waver between moments of connect and disconnect.

2) *State of Mind.*. This is where, depending on the point of view, we enter into a character's consciousness and get some of their direct interiors. A goalie awaits a penalty shot and tries to guess the shooter's tendencies, what move will be tried; a woman wonders what the hell she's doing at a laundromat at 2 a.m. still dressed as Gena Rowlands from *Minnie & Moskowitz*. State of Mind also touches on what we explored earlier: the outer versus the inner story, the overarching plot versus the discoveries of character. What's happening at the plot level, how does the dialogue or the scene further the plot (close off an action; open up another)? What's happening at the level of character, how does the dialogue and scene further the emotional impact the event has on the character (look at where she starts the scene and where she ends it: what journey did she take?). If a scene doesn't have this kind of arc, you probably didn't need to write it.

3) *Action*. Physical movement of some sort: fleeing from an adversary; a fight on a front lawn; looking through backyards for a stolen bicycle.

4) *Description*. A kind of pause in the narrative where we get a description of a structure, a place, a character. These descriptions are often linked to character psychology and the setting's mood. Moreover, short descriptions in a scene often function as beats, pauses, while a character figures out how to change tactics, how to get what he wants.

5) *Exposition*. A form of narrative telling, exposition can establish a quick backstory or compress time so that we can leap forward or back in a narrative. As I argued in a previous chapter, Bernard Malamud uses exposition as section-start bridges.

Trigger words in Dialogue:

In acting, we talk about not speaking until you have to. What are you responding to, what is your scene partner giving you or not giving you that makes you speak? In fiction, just as in acting, there are words that encourage a response and braid a scene together. Moreover, staging, brief physical details work as beats, punctuating a scene, pauses, building tension, suspense, raising questions as to what might be coming next.

Here's a brief part of a scene from Ed McBain's 87th Precinct novel *King's Ransom*. Note all the trigger words.

The given circumstances: Diane King wants her husband to pay the ransom demands for Jeff, their chauffeur's son. King doesn't want to pay; it will break him financially and end his attempted desire to seize ownership in the battle for his company. Besides, the boy is not his son. But, Jeffrey Reynolds was kidnapped because the kidnappers mistook him for Bobby King. You have a moral obligation to save him, Diane argues.

She paused. "You can't be serious."
"I am serious, Diane."
"I don't believe you."
"I'm not paying. Start believing it, Diane. I'm not paying."
"You have to pay."
"I don't have to do anything."
"They asked you for the money."
"Yes, a bunch of crooks asked. Why should they make the rules? Why should I play according to their rules?"
"Rules? Game? There's a little boy involved here."
"There's a whole lot more than a little boy involved," King said.
"There's nothing more than a little boy involved," Diane answered. "If you don't pay them, they'll kill him."
"He may be dead already."
"You can't even consider the possibility."

"Why can't I? I can consider every damn aspect of this thing, I've been asked to pay five hundred thousand dollars for a boy who means absolutely nothing to me. I've got every right to weigh the possibilities. And one possibility is that he's already dead."

"They told you he was still alive. You know they did. You can't excuse yourself by—"

"And another possibility is that they'll kill him even if I do pay. Ask the police. Go ahead. See what they—"

"And if you don't pay, they'll most *certainly* kill him."

"Not necessarily."

King rose from his chair. He left the fire reluctantly, walking to the bar until at the other end of the room. "Would you like a brandy?" he asked.

"No, I would not like a brandy." She watched him as he poured. His hand was steady on the neck of the bottle. The amber fluid filled the brandy snifter. He recapped the bottle, walked back to the easy chair, and gently rolled the glass in his big hands. She continued watching him, and finally she said, "Doug, you have no right to gamble with Jeff's life."

"No? Who has a better right? Who'd they ask for the money? What is Reynolds doing to get his son back? He's sitting on his behind, the way he's sat all his life. Why should I pay for *his* son?"

"Doug. I'm trying very hard to keep from screaming. I'm trying with all my might to keep from screaming."

Take time and mentally circle all the trigger words and you'll see how McBain threads this scene's conflict, escalating the tension: "serious/serious"; "believe/believing"; "paying/paying/pay"; "asked/asked"; "rules/rules/rules"; "little boy involved" (spoken three times); "kill him/kill him/most certainly kill him". McBain even includes a strong visual beat change, King attempting to change tactics: "King rose from his chair. He left the fire reluctantly, walking to the bar until at the other end of the room. 'Would you like a brandy?' he asked." It doesn't work. Dianne rebuffs him: "No, I would not like a brandy." This scene sounds and feels natural because of the clever use of repetition and doubling of the story's life and death's stakes (the boy's and King and Dianne's relationship).

Let's briefly return to my previous chapter's analysis of *On the Waterfront* and study all the trigger words abounding in the "getting to know you" scene, forwarding the narrative's causal chain and tonal shifts. Among the highlights: when the "juice head" tells Terry "he's still a bum" it forces the ex-pugilist to acknowledge his deepest fears: "Who's calling me a bum"; later Edie's trigger word "teacher" (her desire to become one) allows Terry to slide into praising her smarts and his brother Charlie for being a "very brainy guy." Edie responds to Terry's trigger word "brainy" with the challenge, "It isn't just brains, it's how you use them"; and finally his plea to be seen, "You don't remember me, do you?" sets forward her half-rhyme of conciliatory love: "I remember you the first moment I saw you."

Dialogue as a Verb: What are you willing to do to the other person to get what *you* want?

Sidney Lumet once said that acting is "doing. Acting is a verb." If you look back on my analysis of *On the Waterfront* you'll see many subtextual beats listed as verbs: *deflect, challenge, chastise, admit.*

Don't pre-plan or over-determine scenes: let the scene grow organically, surprise you. But once you revise, step back, and think more like an actor. *What verb is being played here? And here? And there?* Every time you have a new line of dialogue, wonder what verb/objective is under it. If the dialogue, in a certain line is cajoling, and you don't feel it quite works, make what she says a reprimand. Change the verb, the action, and the subtext will adjust accordingly. And as the subtext adjusts, so will your choices and thus the revision of a scene you're struggling with will suddenly take you to surprising new ends.

Julie Orringer plays with *verbs* brilliantly in her scene work to "Isabel Fish." The story centers around a victim, Maddy, who was a passenger in a car that crashed into a lake, killing Isabel, the driver and girlfriend of Maddy's older brother Sage. Angry, Sage is now estranged from his sister and treats her cruelly. Maddy tells us in the story's opening line: "I am the canker of my brother Sage's life." Their parents encourage Maddy to take SCUBA lessons at a local YMCA. Central to Orringer's story is a therapeutic theme: confront the fear of nearly drowning in water by going back in and learning how to breathe underwater.

And Maddy does. In the last two scenes Orringer's choice in "actions" intensifies. On her way to SCUBA lessons at the Y, Maddy verbally spars with her brother. He's stuffing food in his mouth, avoiding her. He feels guilty for having killed her "fish" out of spite. To smooth over the fish killing, Sage offers Maddy a cigarette, but she rejects him with a curt, "Yeah, right." He tries to placate her: "I know you steal them sometimes." But she won't allow for any playful connection, calling him a "dickhead." Thwarted, he offers to buy her new fish and she rebuffs him: "Do you know how ridiculous that is?"

Their jazzy musicality isn't leading to any kind of reconciliation, so Sage opts for resignation: "okay, okay," and then surprisingly confesses, "I'm an asshole." This is a moment of complete honesty and vulnerability, and it quietly rhymes with an earlier scene: at a "hot-tub party" Sage told a story in front of his high school peers about five-year-old Maddy peeing in a pool, embarrassing her. Isabel defends the younger Maddy, challenging Sage with the hard-edged "Why do you have to be such an asshole?" and then abandoning him at the party. She and Maddy drive off together in their fateful journey.

Maddy, however, isn't ready to fully embrace Sage's openness, his admissions of guilt. Instead, Maddy tops Sage's confession with the heart-felt tonalities of the wounded, "You make me wish I died instead of her." Beat.

This is a staggering and dramatic punch line. An overhand toss that leaves us on the canvas, long passed the referee counting to ten. Sage is so shaken that it forces him to reassess his relationship with his sister and admit, "I can't believe I turned into such a shitty person. . . . I wasn't even nice to her." Orringer cleverly places the epiphany in the hands of a supporting character, not the lead.

But it is *Maddy's* story, not Sage's, and Orringer writes through the epiphany. Maddy, moved by her brother's confession, soothes him: "You weren't a terrible boyfriend. . . . Isabel loved you." Her actions in the scene move from challenging to rebuffing to staggering to soothing. The verbs he plays follow a trajectory of offering, placating, abjectly confessing, and indirectly apologizing. Orringer plays levels as both characters adopt strategies to get what he or she wants (largely understanding, compassion, and love).

In the final scene, Maddy with Sage by her side conquers her fears. "Quit thinking about the last time," he says, assuring her she won't have another panic attack like she did the previous time in the pool. They tumble in the water and Maddy has the stage's final spotlight:

> We tread water, watching each other through our masks. I cannot see his eyes through the glass, but I can see, reflected small and blue, a girl wearing swim fins and a metal tank, self-contained and breathing underwater.

They're together, committed to one another, but the moment is hers. And she's *visible*.

Earlier, Maddy admired the translucent blue pair of fins and matching mask that her mother purchased for her, observing, "They seem like they'd be almost invisible underwater." It was as if she had wanted to disappear.

Now, however, she isn't hiding. She's finding herself. She can't see his eyes but her own, and like the SCUBA tank she wears, the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus, she, in a moment of double-voiced wonder, is made whole again, no longer fractured but self-contained.

Writing Three-person Scenes and Ricochet Dialogue

Raymond Chandler once joked that he struggled with three person scenes, that's why *The Big Sleep* opens with three couplets (Marlowe and Carmen Sternwood; Marlowe and General Sternwood; and Marlowe and Vivian Regan).

The advantage of an ABC scene over an AB scene is tremendous. In Frank Hauser and Russell Reich's *Notes on Directing*, they suggest staging scenes in diagonal lines and triangles. Two actors on stage are in a single relationship, but add a third and suddenly audiences are in the midst of seven

relationships (one for each pairing; one for each pairing up against a third character; and one for the entire ensemble).

But what if a crime writer creates a destabilized triangle and then repeatedly opens one of the triangle's sides, a character exiting the setting, but that character is never really gone, their absence is a structured presence, an ongoing mood of destabilization? This is what Ed McBain accomplishes in *King's Ransom* in some of his scenes involving the kidnappers.

In chapter five, after luring Jeff to the Sand Spits tar paper farmhouse, Sy takes the eight-year-old to a back room to show him a "real gun." While they're offstage, Kathy talks sense to Eddie. Eddie refers to the kidnapping as "to borrow a kid," but she doesn't let him rest easily, with his half-hearted rationalizations. Instead, she warns, they could all get the electric chair. While attempting to change her husband's course of action, Kathy is painfully aware of Sy's menacing present-absence, glancing periodically at the door Sy and the kid are shut in behind. "What's Sy doing to him in there?" McBain has amped up the story's urgency: this is life or death stakes.

In chapter eight, Sy once again is o!stage, shaving, the bathroom door closed. Kathy returns to work on Eddie's conscience. Eddie insists that they ought to trust Sy, he knows what he's doing, and Kathy, twice, snaps back, "He wants to kill that boy." Eddie, dreaming of a better life in Mexico, refuses to budge. Point blank, she asks, where do you stand, "I have to know," and Eddie refuses to answer, heading outside for a fresh pack of smokes.

The tension of the scene is doubled: will she finally win Eddie over to her position, and what if Sy, behind that closed door, is listening in, aware of her attempted coup? As Eddie continues rummaging the car for smokes, McBain shifts to another triangle, Kathy and Jeff versus her offstage husband and Kathy and Jeff versus the presence behind the door, Sy. She turns to the sofa bed, once again looking off at the closed bathroom door, and promises Jeff, "I'm taking you out of here." As the boy delays, retrieving his unloaded but treasured "real gun," Kathy continues looking at the closed door, wary of the sudden violence lurking.

Eventually, the open side of this particular McBain triangle is closed off as Sy re-appears and catches them making a break. "Where do you think you're going?" McBain now shifts our attention to the absence of Eddie: what might he do if he were to discover Sy roughing up his wife?

Eddie returns and Sy and Kathy keep their showdown (his threats; the attempted escape) a secret, and McBain slides into the menace of double-voiced dialogue. Sy: "'There ain't nothing going to foul up this job.' His eye caught Kathy's. 'Nothing,' he repeated

Three person scenes can also provide wonderful moments of menace. With three or more people you can also enhance your trigger words with ricochet dialogue. Ricochet dialogue, as explored by James Naremore in his monograph on *Sweet Smell of Success,* occurs when one character is talking to

another character for the benefit of a third. When the "juice head" attacksTerry in *On the Waterfront* for, his words in part, are spoken for the edification of Edie. Clifford Odets loved such scenes because they unveiled a pernicious undercurrent to his characters and moved us outside the realm of the usual two-character scene.

Early on in *Sweet Smell of Success* slimy press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) meets one of his "clients" Weldon outside of the 21 Club in New York. Weldon, a woman on his right arm, says to Falco, "Get your hands out of my pocket, thief!" The woman tries to restrain Weldon and as she does Falco barks back that his client is just "showing off for the girl. They supposed to hear you in Korea?" She becomes the beneficiary of two ricochets: Weldon's barbs bouncing off Falco, and his return salvos bouncing off Weldon.

But it's inside the club we get to see Odets (with the help of Ernest Lehman) at the full powers of his craft. Here's a clip. Enjoy the arsenic in the words. Analysis, inspired by Naremore's monograph, will follow:

Sweet Smell of Success (1957)- "This one is toting that one... for you" 1 min Film School

Once inside the 21 Club, Falco, uninvited, joins J. J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster) around his table. Present are Senator Walker, press agent Manny Davis, and ingénue Linda Adams. Here Odets's ricochets fire in several directions in this six-minute scene. All of them suggest veiled threats behind terse words. Upon Falco's arrival, Hunsecker doesn't look at him directly and for the benefit of the others gathered says, "Mac, I don't want this man at my table." Falco, however, remains undaunted. He has some vital information on J. J's sister and forces his way in. Seconds later, J. J. attacks the press agent Davis for possibly having extra-marital affairs: "Everyone knows Manny Davis, except Mrs. Davis." Following an obscure phone call between Hunsecker and another failing press agent, Falco asks the senator. "Do you believe in capital punishment?" The senator is perplexed and Falco explains, "A man has just been sentenced to death." Falco's now talking directly to Senator Walker, but he's letting Hunsecker, via the ricochet, know not to try that stuff with me. Finally, when Linda Adams, in response to Hunsecker's prying questioning, says she's studying singing, "of course," J. J. purrs with a smile full of arsenic, "Why, 'of course'? You might for instance be studying politics." He may be talking to Linda, but his ricochets are landing on Senator Walker, warning him of what this might look like, or as the gossip columnist, seconds later, bluntly states: "Where any hep person knows that this one (camera pans to Manny) is toting that one (swish pan to Linda) around for you" (swish to medium-close up of Walker).

Ernest Hemingway, a literary antecedent to Odets, was an expert at ricochet dialogue. In "The Killers" the two hit men speak for the benefit of everyone else in the diner. They talk to intimidate. They make fun of the menu, of Summit, and the recreation it provides. When one asks, "What do they do here nights?" the other answers, "They eat the dinner. . . . They all come here and eat the big dinner." All of these "soliloquies" are ricocheting off Nick and George, the spectators to this

performance. The killers use trigger words such as "bright boy" and the repetition of "think's" and "thinker" to build tension, until they tie them all up and admit their purpose: they're here to kill a Swede.

Three Modes of Dialogue:

1) *Dialogue Summary*. In the opening moments of dialogue it might be effective to simply tell. An entire fictional hour of conversation can be compressed into a line or two. "They sat and drank their coffee slowly, wondering if the weather would let up and they'd be able to catch the ball game tonight."

2) *Indirect dialogue*. It imitates speech using narrative voice—not the actual voice of the characters. It compresses conversations while giving the illusion of characters speaking. What I love about this mode is that it creates degrees of uncertainty. What's being said is filtered by a narrator so what we get isn't completely accurate. The characters don't have complete autonomy and aren't coming fully from who they are but some kind of blend of their perspectives and the narrator's voice. And for mystery writers this adds a wonderful air of doubt to what's being remembered or shared. "They sat and drank their coffee slowly, wondering if the weather would let up and they'd be able to catch the ball game tonight. Third base side, nothing like seeing a game from four rows up along third base, Ted said. Last time he sat there his all-time favorite player bungled two easy grounders, And the guy's a goddamn gold glover." These latter comments are all indirect. They're spoken from Ted's perspective, but they aren't precisely what he said.

3) *Direct dialogue*. Characters come from where they are. They are totally autonomous and free. This is a powerful device that allows writers to listen to what's being said and let each character follow his/her impulse. Quote marks and, when necessary, dialogue tags are employed.

An example of all three modes from my novel *Cheap Amusements*:

She smiled and handed me some pills. Painkillers. She had her wisdom teeth pulled two years ago, and these were the remainders. [summary] She had also set up an appointment for me with a dentist for Monday. [summary] I'd have to see Abramowitz too. [indirect]

"What day is today?" [direct]

"Saturday." [direct]

I tumbled to the side of the bed and slid into my pants. The room was too bright and I asked her to close the curtains. [summary]

"They are closed," she said. [direct]

"Can you close them tighter—" [direct] I was dizzy and leaned forward, hands on thighs to anchor me. "How did I get here?" [direct] I rubbed my mouth, smelled my hand. Geez, my breath was awful.

"Babe Migano." [direct] I was rather incoherent last night, and then passed out upright in the doorway standing between Leighton and Fortunado. [indirect]

Exercises:

1) Write an AB scene of dialogue. Try to use as few tags as possible. Instead of populating your shot/reverse-shot scene with "saids" use alternating paragraphs and brief descriptions to punctuate and allow us to know who is speaking. Invest in beats.
2) Write an ABC scene of ricochet dialogue. Have character A talking to character B but landing what they're saying on Character C.
3) Write a scene experimenting with mixing all three modes of dialogue: summary, indirect and direct.
4) Experiment with trigger words. Braid a scene together with words that build between two characters, moment to moment and escalate the tension. Have the characters listening, keeping the links in the argument chain alive through aggressive repetitions.
5) Find a moment of dialogue in a scene you've already written. What does each character want, what are they willing to do to get it? Change the verb, the subtext under the words, and rewrite the dialogue accordingly. For example maybe in the original scene Character A wants B to understand them, wants B to appreciate them, and thus *insists* and *pleads* through words and actions. They're earnest. What if you change the intentions: A still wants to be understood by B but opts for a different tactic: *teasing, cajoling*, playfully *flirting*. Rewrite the scene.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Setting, Stillness, and Voice

A quick story on Voice

When I was twenty-four, twenty-five, a professor I was studying fiction with said I lacked "vision." I had no idea what that meant. I wondered if the guy was a holy roller or something. Vision? WTF.

It took me years to figure it out.

Vision.

I studied other writers like a detective cracking a code of cipher. I observed, made notes: the hurt and armor of cynicism in Holden Caulfield; the narrative distance and protective wisecracks in the first-person judgments of Philip Marlowe; the grief and suffering in the works of Bernard Malamud.

Sherwood Anderson also resonated with me. He uses a telling voice and summary scenes to guide us through *Winesburg, Ohio*. His voice is a generous one—his characters are broken and he loves them, presenting them to us raw with all their faults and repressed feelings. His voice seeks connections: not so much as to carnal love, but to emotional love, communion, and understanding.

Just what is your attitude toward your characters and your fictional universe? Do you have a voice, a vision? I'm not talking about themes here, although literary critics will look to your voice to explain to your readership the themes of your prose (and that's okay, that's what they do). But as you compose and make word-to-word choices you are putting forth an attitude and breathing life into your work.

Personally I believe in affairs of the heart (that's why in part I like a telling voice). Moreover, in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson, I love my characters and respect them. I want them to surprise me, not to be defined around one concept but to reflect the ambiguities and complexities of what it means to be human. I seek out prose that honestly explores, in an almost philosophical level of inquiry, what it means to be a human being.

Don't worry about defining your voice yet, but as you write more and more stories try to understand your value system and just what it is that you as an artist stand for.

A second story

Years ago I had a gifted student, man could this cat write. He approached me after class. We had just workshopped a fine story he had put forward about fathers/sons and love and loss. Tears pushed at the corner of his eyes. He pointed to a paragraph that a student had made line edits on. "I think about rhythm all the time," he said. "I deliberately mixed long and short sentences here for effect." The original paragraph was four sentences long. The student critic had edited the prose to make the paragraph six declarative sentences. I told the student, I agree with you, I like your original impulses, choices. "Hey, you're the final arbiter of your work. Keep it the way you want it."

This little anecdote affected me greatly as a teacher. I won't mess with your voice. I want you to find it. That's what I believe. Just as I found my own, with hard work, you'll find yours. Kurt Vonnegut once said that the goal of any creative writing professor should be to not get in a student's way.

My voice

I'm stating this to let you know I can define it. I'm not stating this to tell you what yours should be, but you should, in time, be able to define the emotional and technical properties of your voice. My voice is rooted in the Ernest Hemingway school of parataxis. I like declarative sentences (subject/verb/object constructions). I rarely start a sentence with a subordinate clause. I prefer Anglo-saxon words to Latinate words. I like hard consonant sounds. I use short descriptors to add beats, moments of tension between bits of dialogue. In terms of dialogue I prefer, in two-person scenes, to eschew tags if possible. For me, "said" is not an invisible word. Moreover, I'm not a big fan of "ing" sentence starts. I also like to use free indirect discourse as a way to create uncertainty in a narrative. But that's me. I can define my likes. Can you?

Setting as an On Ramp to Voice

I believe that setting and the props featured in a scene should do two important things: convey nuances of mood or attitudes and reveal psychology of character. If you consistently use setting in these ways you will be well on your way to developing your voice.

Voice in Raymond Chandler's "The Big Sleep"

As I stated earlier, Chandler once joked that he wasn't good at writing three–person scenes so his debut novel begins with three two-person scenes. But despite that shortcoming, Chandler establishes character/voice/attitude out of the gate (written when he was in his early fifties):

> It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.

This opening establishes Marlowe's wry attitude, his self-deprecating humor (the display handkerchief cracks me up), and a subtle reveal (he has a drinking problem, his way of escape from the pyrrhic, the cost of every quest he undertakes). Moreover, the threat of a "hard" rain underscores the violence, the "mean streets" down which this man must go. Finally, his quip about "four million dollars" establishes, via contrast, Marlowe as a hard-working, honest man, navigating his spaces in a world of privilege, entitlement, and excess.

Later, in chapter three, when Marlowe meets Vivian Regan, Chandler further explores this theme of excess and his lead character's distance from such a world:

> This room was too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall, and the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead. There were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out. The windows stared towards the darkening foothills. It was going to rain soon. There was pressure in the air already.

Wow. My favorite moment here: "the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows." Talk about too much-ness. This detail shows that Vivian lacks preciseness and control. No wonder there's pressure in the air. And the judgment behind "dirty" and "bled out" is all you need to know about Marlowe's protective armor, his distancing himself from the world he travels in. This is setting as voice. There's an attitude here.

Writing Crime

Of course, crime fiction relies on attitude. We readers accept a certain kind of fictional contract: we're always on our guard; we can't trust the world we see unveiling before us; everyone is a suspect; everyone has something to hide and is prone to half-truths and lying to protect themselves or others. What clue will reveal the hidden truth?

In Georges Simenon's *Maigret Sets a Trap* (translated by Daphne Woodward) he establishes the possibility of Marcel Moncin's guilt with a detail that appears, possibly, just tossed away: "She had opened the glass-paneled door of a drawing room done up in a modern style which was unexpected in this old house, but which had nothing aggressive about it; Maigret told himself he wouldn't mind

living in a setting like this. Only the paintings on the walls displeased him, he couldn't make head or tail of them." The last sentence is the punch line, the clue. The paintings are a mess because they mirror the disordered mind of a serial killer. Moreover, unlike the distance in Marlowe's voice, Simenon humanizes Maigret as a man who connects with the world and its simple comforts: "Maigret told himself he wouldn't mind living in a setting like this." He's secure, moving about the arrondissements of Paris. The world is not threatening. Throughout the Maigret novels Simenon presents his Chief Inspector as enjoying the quotidian: drinking a beer, standing by a warm fire, going to the cinema, Saturday nights, with his wife, and walking with his wife in the evenings and sticking out his tongue to catch falling snowflakes. Again, this is voice. A vision.

Setting and the Triggering Neighborhood

In *The Triggering Town* Richard Hugo argues that you should avoid writing about your hometown but find a new town that inspires memory. The problem with your hometown is that the details are fixed and stable. You'll have a hard time making a corn silo black if in your memory it is yellow. Or if I were to write about a high school custodian, Rusty, who was a drunkard, it might be hard for me to imagine him in a different light, a guy who in his downtime replayed classic chess games in his small cinder block office.

Okay, full disclosure. I don't quite buy Hugo's argument.

I'm more with the Bernard Malamud, John Steinbeck and Alice Munro school. Write toward what you know. Establish firmly a place as your own, but also recapture the spaces you have inhabited. These writers brought to life where they lived: New York City; Salinas Valley; rural Ontario.

Years ago I wrote a story, "'Come on, You're Dead"' that appeared in the pages of the *Green Hills Literary Lantern* and wound up being nominated for a Pushcart Prize. The story's beginnings grew out of a setting exercise I shared with my students. When they write in class, I do too.

Anyway, here's the assignment: re-imagine the neighborhood you grew up in (a city block; a trailer court; an apartment complex, a farm). Draw a map of the neighborhood, and label the various dwellings. I recalled a crescent I lived on in Toronto's North York. The house at the end of the block featured a doctor with five children and a wife with an alcohol problem (I figured this part out later). She liked margarine, and thought it was better for you than butter. Next door was an Italian family, their father worked construction, and Mrs. Capitelli used to make homemade ravioli (the noodles from scratch—I stayed at her place sometimes after school when my parents weren't yet home from work). Some of the lawns of the houses in our neighborhood weren't sodded yet; other homes hadn't had the drywall installed. There were four different patterns to the houses: a kind of suburban Levittown with spindly trees and fenced-in backyards. And I, with my Thompson submachine gun from the Marx Toy Company, played war games all the time.

From this mapping and calling up of past memories grew an anti-war story (it didn't start out that way) about me and the doctor's son playing war and messing with stuff we shouldn't have been messing with. A composite of my kid brother and younger kids in the neighborhood makes a memorable guest spot in the piece too. He wanted to hang with me and my pals and fit in, and that desire gets all of us in trouble. The story explored unsupervised children's time and the dangers inherent in that. That wasn't my initial intention in writing the story but no doubt that "vision" grew from the mix of my memories of then with my having been a relatively young parent at the time I composed the story. My daughters in 2004 were ages 17; 13; and 7. Ultimately, the story resonates a sad resignation and questions masculinity. Again, I didn't start with an agenda or a theme, but that's the undercurrent to what emerged through my triggering neighborhood memory. Try it. See what emerges for you.

Let me pump the brakes a second. I don't want to be too dismissive of Hugo. I have used his advice for poets in *The Triggering Town*. I often go to Webster City, Iowa an hour down Highway 20 from where I live in Cedar Falls. I don't know what draws me to it, but I find myself attracted to the town and I've used it to recall memories of various small towns and small cities I've lived in in Ontario: Norwood, Cobourg, and Peterborough. These places, combined with Webster City's armory, local Rexall drugstore, diner with its open hot beef sandwiches and Willson Avenue spelled with two L's have all figured in my creation of "Winsome" an imaginary town in upstate New York that features my two-fisted cab driver and drifter Eddie Sands. My Winsome has an armory, a small college on a hill, a community ice arena, a strange street named Polis, and a local drugstore/diner, Regehr's, where you can still get an orange egg cream and a hot open beef sandwich.

Setting, Stillness and Voice

I'm a city boy. In *On the Waterfront*, Marlon Brando said, "I don't like the country. The crickets make me nervous." I'm with him. I don't like the quiet of open spaces. If I'm on a farm house under a black sky and no neighbors around I worry that any moment *In Cold Blood* will unfold. When I visit my sister-in-law in Emporia, KS, I'm uneasy at night.

I love white noise, sound. I write and listen to music (hard bop jazz; 1950s rockabilly; punk), or play an old Leafs game in the background. I've never been one to meditate. The closest I come to relaxing and being in a quiet "zone" or flow is when I write or play my guitar (a Martin D-28).

But, if you want to possibly find, maybe, a hidden aspect of your voice—if you're an enthusiastic, idealistic person—then try to lean into a moment of stillness. Pause the narrative storyline, stay in a specific feeling, and explore that feeling, see what associations it leads to. Allow that pause to take you somewhere lyrical.

The end game here is to seek and find some kind of wonder.

Don't listen to Mr. Brando. Listen to the crickets. Invest in that sound. Where does that sound take you?

Ever just lulled about in the shower, feeling the water run over you, as your mind drifts to relaxing far off places? Ever just floated idyllically in a swimming pool feeling the sun on your face, but the brightness of the sky still present behind closed eyes? Or walked in the woods on a harvest moonlit night and felt a connection to something beyond yourself? Go somewhere quiet, and keep yourself open to whatever enters in. What awe or wonder stirs within you?

Many stories about youth contain such moments of intense feeling and connection. Here's an example of intense stillness from Sue Monk Kidd's powerhouse novel *The Secret Life of Bees:*

> When I looked up through the web of trees, the night fell over me, and for a moment I lost my boundaries, feeling like the sky was my own skin and the moon was my heart beating up there in the dark. Lightning came, not jagged but in soft, golden licks across the sky. I undid the buttons on my shirt and opened it wide, just wanting the night to settle on my skin, and that's how I fell asleep, lying there with my mother's things, with the air making moisture on my chest and the sky puckering with light.

Setting, the Ekphrastic, and Edward Hopper

I love Hopper's work. I'm a fan of Film Noir and the first time I saw a print of Hopper's "Nighthawks" I resonated with the the painting's noir vibe of alienation, loneliness, and destitution that glowed with a sense that here were real, hardscrabble people taking a brief respite from the city's mean streets.

About four years ago I was visiting the Cincinnati Art Museum and found myself face-to-face with another Hopper painting, this time an original, hanging in their walls: "Sun on Prospect Street." Painted in 1934. Here's a facsimile:

https://www.cincinnatiartmuseum.org/art/explore-the-collection?id=11297054

I was mesmerized, staring at it from all distant angles, different distances, for close to half an hour. Suddenly the setting of the painting inspired a future story for me to write about two hit men sitting in a V-8 Ford, looking at that house, readying to kill a custodian.

Upon returning to my oldest daughter's home in Deer Park I quickly wrote a first draft in a white heat. Here's the first seven paragraphs of "Bend of the Sun." Note how Hopper's imagery inspires

my choice of imagery, a feeling of stillness, and a voice dipped in the sensibilities of Noir's lost-world losers (and I use the term affectionately):

> The window was open just enough to let in the cool night air. But it was no longer night time. It was day, and everything was yellow, and the window was still open.
>
> "Place is deserted. The whole goddamn street." Donnie was nineteen or twenty with hands the size of cinder blocks and a face full of licorice fuzz. A dotted black line withered across his upper lip. He had been in Gloucester for a week, studying patterns of their target. "Slavini always opens it at night. Closes it in the morning. Must still be asleep." He leaned against the passenger door, a porkpie hat nonchalantly tipped against his kinky hair.
>
> "It's Sunday. Everyone's at church, and he sleeps." Wingels, unlike Donnie, had small hands. He often wore women's-sized gloves because he liked tight-fitting clothes. They made him feel secure.
>
> "Not that church." Donnie pointed up Prospect Street to the two curved cornices rising above rooftops and trees. "Greek church." He tapped heavy fingers along the dash. "They got them Greek lines."
>
> "You Greek? The Othello of Greeks?"
>
> Donnie laughed, low gravelly. "I'm from Waterloo, Iowa."
>
> "I don't want to know where you're from—" Best to keep their backstories their own.

The genre of ekphrastic poetry comments on the art piece that has inspired the poet's vision or aesthetic response, as in Keats's magnificent "Ode to a Grecian Urn." But in "Bend of the Sun," Hopper's painting was a trigger, a tool that took me into another world without the meta commentary. I don't acknowledge Hopper directly, but his art is in the story's DNA, providing a noir vibe and scaffolding of mis-aligned details: daylight and a church Sunday, and not night, to commit a murder; an empty street with the bend of the sun and no witnesses; a Catholic community with a Greek church; two hit men, one Black, one white, one young, one older, one wearing a porkpie, the other women's gloves.

From there things for these two just get darker, more defamiliarized, as the story leans into themes of abuse.

Case Study #6: "Ghost Town"

I absolutely love Sarah Cypher's story. It is a master class in the use of setting for conveying nuance and vision.

Queer couples live in constant danger. Unwarranted threats and undercurrents of dismissal can occur at any time. And this story, set in Oakland, on the fringe line between gentrification and the run-down parts of town, captures that threat. On their block drift Cheetos bags and Swisher Sweets

and Jolly Rancher wrappers. Around their neighborhood lurks violence: "The week before we closed escrow, a twenty-one-year old woman was found stabbed to death on the next corner, by the liquor store."

Moreover, neighbors try to fit our narrator and her wife Andrea into a heteronormative box: "'What? What? Where are the men?' he cried helpless. 'Your husbands?'" He can't grasp or refuses to grasp that these women aren't sisters but wives.

Cyphers then layers the images of death and decay inherent in the setting to hang like black crepe above the characters' narrative arc. The setting begins to represent or mirror the "rough patch" in the relationship between the two women. It enriches the darkening mood as the women argue over the possibility of having a child and settling in or moving away from the neighborhood.

And in the story's final turn Cyphers even takes stillness to a dark place. As opposed to my earlier focus on awe and wonder, here stillness represents loss and resignation: not eating a final meal of mac and cheese, baking loaves of bread. The Ghost Town now inhabits the relationship between the two women. Andrea leaves to return to Texas. Will she come back? By story's end she's a haunting specter, a fading memory.

The story's final paragraph, the rebuilding of the neighborhood school, is a haunting call back to the childless couple theme and a kind of presence/absence, children breaking through the womb-like glass:

> The dog seems up for it. So we head to the next block and take in the new yellow fence, the white corrugated walls, the fresh concrete, the play structure in a perfectly deserted courtyard. The tufts of pampas grass are so fresh the dirt is still black around their base. All the classrooms overlook the playground; all their windows are brand new. Their glass still bears the factory stickers and adhesive warnings, waiting to be peeled away by so many little fingernails.

Exercises:

1) Write a scene in a setting in which you use the weather to convey a mood or attitude.
2) Write a scene in which you use the neighborhood to convey a mood or attitude.
3) Write a scene inspired by the dynamics of a painting or photograph. As you create a scene, allow the mood and nuances of the original art to affect your voice. Channel the original texts intentions and aesthetics.
4) Write an AB scene in which you lay out some clues that reveal the inner psychology of character. Write the scene in both limited third person (as in the case of Simenon's presentation of Maigret) and first person (as in the case of Chandler's presentation of Marlowe).

5) Find a moment of stillness in a location one might not expect to find it (i.e. the bowling alley; a lecture hall full of people).
6) Write a scene of stillness that leans not into awe and wonder but sadness and resignation. Don't give us a direct epiphany but rely on a resonant image.
7) The triggering neighborhood: after mapping an area from your past, take one of the dwellings and imagine what's going on in their "home." Make yourself a peripheral narrator to their story.
8) Take a narrative you've already written and find space within it to write a new scene or expand an existing scene into a moment of stillness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Point of View

Point-of-view is the most important decision you'll make in writing a story. It guides everything: perspective, voice, vision. In terms of perspective, your choice in point of view will shape how much knowledge the narrator will share or repress with an audience. In terms of voice it will invite us anywhere on the spectrum between a confessional telling mode or a reserved minimalist mode. In terms of vision the question of "from what distance?" (close to the lead character or farther removed and watching upon high like from the balcony) will add layers to the values the story puts forward.

Because of the importance of this decision, I'm not a big fan of telling students to change their point of view. As a matter of fact in my classes that's bad form. I trust in initial impulses. I guess I'm an unrepentant Beat Generation guy; I believe that first choices are made for a reason and we should trust in those choices and find ways to make them work.

For the purposes of this primer I'm only going to recommend three points of view for the beginning student. These are the most prevalent, the ones I see again and again as an editor at the *North American Review*. Master at least one of these three classic points-of-view, and then, perhaps, try your hand at something a little more non-traditional. (like a second person POV).

First Person

Popular among YA writers and readers and great for telling stories of youth coming to terms with some of life's harsh realities, this is a good way to develop your voice. First person narratives can have energy, sass, a sense of sharing from the heart—a real confessional vibe.

What kind of speaker are you presenting to your audience? Do they like to ramble? Do they wander off in long digressions? Do they judge the world? Do they find beauty in little, offbeat things, like the way a child wades into a pond, going farther and farther out, daring to discover how close they can get before flooding their rubber boots with pond water. Do they join a series of thoughts by "and" to keep the monologue going? Do they slide into apologetic transitions with a self-deprecating "anyways"? Do they comment on someone having too big of an upper lip or someone else having an uneven face like a Picasso painting as a way to distance themselves from those they encounter? All of these choices reveal character and vision. Holden Caulfield hates phonies and he is always on the lookout for them. Cynicism is his armor.

Moreover, "I" speakers let you into their limited range of understanding of the world, and this is really great for young writers. When I was in my twenties and thirties, the world was a strange, alien place, and what I knew was limited to my rather limited experience. So a first person voice was appealing because I didn't have to know a wide range of things, or do a lot of research about provenance and antiques like Donna Tartt did for *Goldfinch* or dissect radio technology and Hitler youth programming the way Anthony Doerr did for *All the Light We Cannot See*. We can stay in our comfort zones of knowing as little as our central character does.

First person "I" stories are also great for writing private eye yarns. It restricts us to knowing only as much as the detective and places the reader in the detective's shoes, trying to out-guess him or her, knowing as little as the PI does. It also helps the writer create a series of surprises. We discover the two guys behind his frosted glass door with clamped guns in their hands at the same moment the detective does.

The dangers of first person, of course, is overdoing it, leaning too much into the playful voice you've created, letting it take on Promethean proportions and burning away from you. Prometheus breathes fire and too much fire will burn down the world building of your story. What you might find a regular riot, everyone else is getting a little tired of. So be careful.

The other danger is you have to allow your first person narrator to be who they are. You might want them to make a better choice, a more moral choice, but you have to stick to the imagined probabilities of the voice you've created and have your "I" character act accordingly. We love Huck Finn, we love how he stands up for Jim out in the wilderness and how Huck feels he's going to be damned for a decision he makes half-way through the novel. But we're also frustrated with him for not standing up to Tom Sawyer later in the book, and letting Tom do all his nasty shenanigans vis-a-vis Jim. Huck can't stand up to Tom because he represents "civilization." We want Huck to push back against Tom, but Twain has to be true to the Huck he's created. And you have to be true to your first person voice. Stay consistent.

A different kind of "I" story

Years ago a student of mine, Darek Benesh, introduced me to a short story form that borrows from the works of William Faulkner (see *As I Lay Dying)* and Tom Perotta (see *Election*). A core incident (a child climbing inside a tree, getting stuck, and dying) is reflected upon by several "differing" first-person perspectives. Each brief section (2-3 pages) is titled by the name of the character who is speaking to us (Susan; Clifford; Denise; Mr. Switchback). Each character speaks in their own voice and this creates a wonderfully prismatic narrative, in the traditions of Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), which leaves us questioning what's the real meaning of the story and filling us with a series of uncertainties. Over the course of a twenty to thirty page story, each character can speak to us on 3-4 different occasions. The core incident (why or how the child died) ultimately remains somewhat

of a mystery. The narrative isn't all tied up; the writer leaves us readers with a handful of loose strings.

Case Study #7: "Before the N-Word" (pdf not on JSTOR yet)

C. E. Poverman's striking story is about memory and accountability.

The protagonist attends a prep-school reunion and meets up with classmates he hasn't seen in ten years. Percy, one of only three Black students from back then, is now dying of cancer and requests a chance to speak to his classmates addressing wrongs of the past.

Poverman, from the opening paragraph, freely moves from narrative showing to narrative telling, setting up his theme:

> Starting up the stairs to the second-floor dining room—I'm still pressing my name tag to my lapel—I thought I recognized Joe Clark on the landing above me. As if looking into a distance, he said, "That you, Tim Moore?" He waited for me. Easily ten years since we'd seen each other, but he was much as I remembered him. There seemed to be guys who looked more or less the way we were when we were undergraduates—well almost—and then guys who turned a corner and became unrecognizable. I read that at some time in our lives we internalize a fixed image of ourselves and after that can never really know how we appear to others.

Memory, recognition, knowability.

Percy, "without reproach," shares with his audience how difficult it was and is to be Black in America, and he relives his memories of a tricentennial event at Brewster in 1960. To commemorate the event, Mr Stubbs, the headmaster wanted to "bring to life the original Elijah Brewster endowment to the school, which had been: one negro manservant and 440 British pounds. Mr. S had asked Percy if he would stand beside him during his morning talk and be the negro manservant."

Percy agree, except during the ceremony "instead of referring to Percy as the 'one negro manservant," Mr. S said, 'one nigger slave.'"

Percy explores the denigration and pain this event caused him and how it led to his own rising Black consciousness. Our protagonist, however, has no memory of the story playing out that way: "None whatsoever. Had I been absent that day?"

No. "I'm sure that I was there. And yet, the episode was an absence." Why? Because he wasn't listening. The Black experience wasn't on his radar, what they were facing wasn't *recognizable*.

I admire how Poverman leans into the emotional complications of characters and storytelling. Rather than present a character we *want* to see (inclusive and present) we have a shadow self that was tone deaf and absent. Moreover, Moore's white guilt shifts the story's final emphasis, showcasing a stunning reversal:

> I, too, started working my way forward. As I did so, I felt an uneasiness, which had been coming and going in me, rise and spread. It was a fear that I couldn't name and then I realized that it was that Percy would not recognize me. On one level, I think I knew this was completely irrational, but on another, it had been a long time, all of us had changed, and then when I thought about it, I had to ask myself, why would he remember me, really?

I love the story's confessional voice. Usually when writers tell stories that have an autobiographical slant, they often present themselves as the hero or the person wronged. But here, we have a real honest exploration of neglect, and a writer who's not afraid to present humanity with all its blemishes.

Third Person Limited

When I first started writing and sending out literary stories this was my favorite mode of expression. Henry James called it "central intelligence." We walk alongside our protagonist and decide when to enter into their inner monologues or when to share some necessary backstory. A writer can decide how much, within this point-of-view, to balance inner and outer stories. And here's where the difference between limited third and first-person perspectives are most pronounced. In first person, the backstory is spoken to us and closely aligned to the lead character's perspective (unless you're striking an unreliable, ironic voice); in limited third person you can play with the distance of your backstories, telling us what a character understands of the past or telling us more than your lead character understands. The possibilities for differing ranges of knowledge are greater in limited third.

I also felt as a young writer that a limited third point-of-view gave me more control. William Wordsworth believed that the formal properties of poetry (meter and rhyme scheme) controlled the emotional intensity of the work, keeping it in a sweet spot of intense feelings reflected in tranquility rather than swinging too violently into over writing. And I guess that's how I saw third-person limited. Putting a limit on my melodramatic flourishes (and I do have them. I remember in one of my earliest workshop stories I OD'ed on adjectives, writing such gems as "unholy sink" and "Cro-Magnon face"). My voice, through limited third, became more tempered, restrained, less adjectival, and not lost in the quirky perspectives of my first-person protagonist.

The dangers of a limited third point-of-view are two-fold: how to avoid a flat voice and veering dangerously close to boring prose, and slipping perhaps into too much showing and not enough telling. I'll lay my cards on the table: as an editor, I am really tired of camera objective point-of-view and clean as glass prose. I don't particularly enjoy stories that read like they were adapted from screenplays.

What we have in our toolbox is the ability to *tell* a reader things. It's harder to do in film and on the stage (you usually have to rely on self-reflexive dialogue). Prose, unlike a camera, can collapse time, can expand time. We can move outside the limits of the moment-to-moment now.

Your voice will develop with time (be patient—you'll find your value systems in terms of style and themes) and that voice will help shape and hone your third-person perspectives.

One final thought: a trick that I see so many writers perform is to begin a third-person narrative with a scene, placing us in the immediacy and the midst of things, and then pulling back and giving us backstory. This accordion style of storytelling, stretching and contracting repeatedly between outer versus inner, gives the piece depth and nuance.

Case Study #8: "The Treasure Map"

Jaqueline Eis's "The Treasure Map" relies on a triangle: a widow (Elizabeth), her deceased husband (Edwin), and a wayward brother-in-law (Tommy) to tell a strong but restrained story of frisson, family loyalty, and awkwardness.

The story's opening paragraph begins with a doubling, a knocking sound that reminds Elizabeth of the final days of caring for her husband and his labored breathing and Tommy hammering, replacing shingles on the roof. "She knew she should feel grateful, but she didn't." This sentence establishes everything: the awkward distance between the two. But note the restraint that limited third gives Eis. The control as opposed to writing something in first like: "Goddamn it, what's he still doing on the roof?" The last line of the story's first paragraph establishes the triangle's dynamics: "She would rather be haunted by Edwin's ghost than to have his brother constantly shadowing her." Again, note the control. In first person, Eis might have written, "Is this guy ever going to leave?"

The story and its triangle takes a turn when Elizabeth discovers and old photograph and notices something she was blind to:

> A small photo album in the same drawer held a picture that made her pause. She remembered taking it herself on a ferry boat ride during a trip to Oregon in 1935. Tommy was along that time, at Edwin's invitation. The picture had always been painful to her because Edwin glared at the camera, at her, angry that she'd let the boys get away with some mischief. They cowered next

> to Tommy, but she had never looked at his expression until now. Her cheeks flushed. His look, directly at the camera, smiling openly and unmistakably—though she shuddered at the thought—with something more than affection. Had Tommy once had feelings for her? How could she not have noticed?

A writer in limited third can decide from what distance and Eis's voice isn't in the balcony looking down nor is it walking tightly alongside her character. Instead she opts for a middle ground; the last two sentences of this paragraph are an interior moment but it's tempered with some tranquility.

In the story's final moments, Tommy's departure, he tells "Lizzy" that she's a good woman, and Eis writes, "She wished it was true, wished she'd made him some sandwiches for the road." Midwestern reserve is still present (the story *is set* in Nebraska, 1957), but then the story moves into a space somewhere between quiet restraint and emotional intensity:

> Her hand grasped the window so hard it wobbled in the door frame. "Oh, Tommy," she said, but no other acceptable words would come. She wished she could point out to him that this too was a kind of love, his own, their own, peculiar and long-suffering way of showing it, but he wouldn't know what to do with that either.

The window "wobbled"; she exclaimed his name, but then no other words poured forth. Eis stays true to her characters, what's possible for them within this narrative. Just as in the case of Huck Finn being unable to speak up for Jim against Tom's cruel pranks, Elizabeth and Tommy fall back into the story's reserved tone and spaces. Poignant.

The story brilliantly ends with a return to the triangle and the presence/absence of Edwin as Elizabeth imagines her husband laughing over Tommy's final exit and saying, "Isn't that just like him?" Words that can't be spoken directly are left in the landscape of the mind.

Big Third or the Omniscient Point-of-View

This was frowned upon in the 1980s. At least in the workshops I was taking at Kansas State University. "You think you're writing *War and Peace?"* Save that for the novelists. And I can't tell you how many times in the margins of my stories I saw scribbled "point-of-view?" and "head hopping." The omniscient or what some folks like to call the God point of view was supposed to be the domain of sprawling novels, Mr. Tolstoy.

Central intelligence (limited third) and first person were the only perspectives sponsored by all workshoppers. But I recall seeing examples, in modernist short stories, of head hopping all the time. Morley Callaghan, Canada's first great fiction writer, head hops in his oft-anthologized "All the Years of Her Life." The story, largely in limited third, is from adolescent Alfred's perspective. He's

caught shoplifting from Mr. Carr's store. But before Alfred's mother arrives to bail him out of trouble, Callaghan hops into Mr. Carr's mental landscape ever so briefly: "Mr. Carr was surprised at the way she came in. She was very calm, quiet and friendly. 'Is Alfred in trouble?' Mrs. Higgins asked."

I don't see a problem. And this story was published in *The New Yorker!*

The rule of not doing this was just an arbitrary one enforced by workshops all across the country. Fitzgerald head hops. Hemingway head hops. Give me a break. Ever have a teacher correct you for using "which" instead of "that" or "that" instead of "which"? Who cares? I mean really. It was just a rule set up by grammarians and the rap against head hopping was just a similar rule set up by workshop professors.

If head hopping was seen as a crime, big third omniscience for a *short story* was seen as an even bigger offense. However, around 2008, when speculative fiction took off at university writing programs, storytellers more fully embraced narrative telling and painting their words on a broader canvas with shifting perspectives, prismatic insights, and jumps in time.

The challenge of an omniscient point-of-view is that the writer has to understand and know *a lot more* than just the limited experiences of your third-person or "I" protagonist. This will require research, wisdom, and, I believe (although this isn't alway necessary), a generosity for the human condition and an ability to empathize with a variety of people (men; women; he/him; she/her; they/them; he/they; she/they), people from differing nationalities, races, faith-based systems, etc.

Why I don't like labeling this the "God" perspective is that I think a writer should never play God, should never be an Old Testament prophet of righteous judgment or an all-knowing seer, but someone who is always open, humble, channeling whatever impulses the universe is gifting us with. Listen to those impulses, follow them.

Okay, that's a little hey wow and out there, but that's how I roll. Humility, living in uncertainty, and being present are, I believe, three of the central tenants of being a writer.

Case Study #9: "Three Days Discovered" (pdf not on JSTOR yet)

Marc Dickinson's story is a tour-de-force of a bigger point-of-view and repressed exposition. The story centers around a strong core incident: the mysterious death of a high school student, Samantha. As the story unfolds, like a literary episode inspired by *Twin Peaks* we are faced with more questions instead of answers. The story's repressed narration (the and how and exactly what happened) is opened but never fully.

Dickinson's narration constantly shifts perspectives. The opening sentences suggest a town full of gossip: "Samantha Harris has been found. Three days missing and after all the search parties, all the theories—abduction? Runaway?—she's discovered at a park two miles from her house." This is followed by an even bigger telling voice filling us in on the setting: "It used to be a landfill, so sometimes with enough rain the soccer fields release a smell like rotten eggs." The girl's father is observed from the narrator's balcony: "The father is too angry to cry. In three days his daughter has gone from Homecoming Court to Jane Doe." By contrast, the mother's perspective is much closer, veering into free indirect discourse: "Finally, the mom steps in, says to leave their daughter alone. Some lab rat with a scalpel won't be going near her child." Then the narrative stretches out like an accordion once again taking up an almost group mindset: "Today the school is full of stories. A friend of a friend, someone on the force, says once the court mandated an autopsy, traces of opioid turned up in the bloodwork." Similarly, "The church had already prepared a candlelight vigil. Sunday night, they picked the best photo for the flyer—Samantha, almost angelic in a white dress—and then selected a theme: A Night of Hope." And later, with high school lover Meg, the narrative voice closes in: "For years, Sam took Meg under her wing. And now she's gone, leaving Meg open to attack."

In Dickinson's final turn the amalgam of these voices (the mix of individuals and group mindset) coalesce into a brilliantly non-resolved ending: "What's a town without its martyrs? Still, tonight they continue to toss and turn, sick with hope the morning headlines will make more sense. That maybe Samantha can somehow be there for them one more time, telling them all the things they need to hear."

Exercises:

1) This exercise has three components. Begin with a core incident shared by two people. One, write the scene, in limited third, from character A's perspective. Two, rewrite the scene, in limited third, from character B's perspective. Three, rewrite the scene shifting from both characters' perspectives.
2) This exercise has two components. Write a visitation scene (someone from the past, a brother-in-law perhaps, arrives on Character A's doorstep). In version one, use limited third, and keep the narrative distance somewhat tranquil (walking alongside but with some midwestern reserve). In version two, use limited third but move the narrative distance closer, using free indirect discourse to give us some of Character A's inner monologues.
3) Write a paragraph or two from a group mindset, sharing some kind of gossip.
4) Write a scene in first person leaning into the comic side of voice. Change the emotional timbre by rewriting the scene leaning into sad resignation or snarky cynicism.
5) Choose a core incident. Reflect on that incident from four different first person perspectives.

6) Write a sports scene. Let's say hockey. Scoring a goal in overtime. In version one write it in either first or third person from the forward who scores; in version two write it in first or third person from a fan's perspective; in version three write it in first or third person from the vantage point of a player sitting on the bench or his teammate, the goalie at the other end of the ice.

CHAPTER NINE

Learning the Unwritten Rules

In the late 1980s, after a three-year hiatus from the workshop, I started sending out stories for publication. I got a piece rejected (what else was new?) and the editor (at least I think it was the editor and not an assistant or intern) scrawled across the top of the first page, "learn the unwritten rules."

Say what?

I had no idea what I did wrong. I still don't.

What are the unwritten rules? What rules did I apparently break?

Did I explain the story in my cover letter? No. I knew that was a no-no. Did I say too much about being an unpublished author? I thought editors might like to know that. Did I go on and on about being a cab driver for a year? No. Well maybe a little. I figured that kind of bio info might be intriguing. My PhD mentor Robert L. Carringer said he once put a prospective professor on an interview short list because he flew helicopters in Vietnam. Anyway, did I paper clip the goddamn manuscript instead of stapling it? What the fuck did I do? Was there something about the story that broke rules? Shallow characters? Plot inconsistencies? Tonal shifts that made the prose uneven? Hmm.

You've heard of the Riddle of the Sphinx. Well this was the riddle of Gordon Lish.

He was the editor of the journal I received the scrawl from.

So out of this Riddle of the Lish mishegoss I'm hoping to provide some answers. For you. My suggestions on writing fiction are my attempts to lift the veil on some of the mysteries of storytelling. Consider what I say as my *written rules* that will lead to your success as an author. I certainly hope so.

Workshop Etiquette

During an MLB broadcast Steve Stone once said, "I probably shook off more catchers than any other pitchers of my era." He figured the W (win) or L (loss) goes next to his name in the record books not the catcher's. So he took ownership of calling a game, the choice of pitches thrown in varying given circumstances.

I think writers should treat their work the way Steve Stone approached pitching.

It's your work. You call the shots. *Take ownership. Shake off some of the suggestions of the workshop.*

Perhaps what I'm saying sounds like an anti-workshop position, but it isn't. I think the writer is the final arbiter of what's said about the work and should go with their gut. Take the advice that works but don't try to please everyone. Be true to *your* vision. The job of the teacher is to not get in your way: encourage; point out what needs work; but never hijack the story. I don't want you to write a Grant Tracey story; I want you to write *your* story.

An idea I got from Ron Carlson. Look for variables. A story puts so many things in motion, juggles so many balls, and often, for revision a story can be made stronger by finding a ball that needs to be juggled longer. In other words seek out elements that are already in your story that can be further leaned into. What maybe got dropped that needs to be back in the story's air?

Okay, that's a little abstract. But, let's just put it plainly: I like writers who are a little stubborn.

As a teacher, I don't see myself as a collaborator. The work is yours. My job is to help you realize what's in the work and find ways for *you* to make it the best it can be. My name doesn't go on the work when it appears in print. Yours does. I'm Steve Stone's catcher that now and again needs to be shaken off.

A buddy of mine says he always tries to find a third way. There's what he wrote; then there's an editor's suggestion, sometimes a line edit with a strongly worded revision recommendation; and then there's the third way: take into account what the editor said, but make it your own. Write *toward* what the editor suggested without copping their voice. Make it your publishing W (as in win). Not yours *and* the editor's.

For the writer

Remain quiet while your work is being discussed. Take notes and listen. When the discussion is finished, I let the student writer ask some questions that weren't addressed during the workshop. I also, ahead of time, allow the student to ask up to three craft questions that they can list at the end of their manuscript. Few take me up on this offer, but if they do it allows them to take some agency with regard to what we focus on in class.

I begin with what's working, focusing on cookies. Nomnomnom. Then I move to the questions (if there are any at the end of the manuscript), and then conclude with what's not working. I then ask the writer if they have any additional questions for us.

For the workshoppers

Read the story three times. Yes. Three times. The first time just get a feel for it. What's its intentions? What kind of story is it? Place it in a tradition. How well does it play by the rules it sets up for itself? I believe in textual intentions, not necessarily writer's intentions. The text is always bigger than us. We writers don't always know what we're doing. There are so many happy accidents, and if we're really channeling the world it will surprise us.

On a second read, activate the text, commenting on what's working and not working. Be specific. Don't just write "good." What makes a particular turn of phrase or character choice interesting or good?

On the third read make sure to conclude with a long end comment that summarizes your findings for the work. Sign your comments. We stand by our words.

Recently, I asked my students what they thought their responsibilities for worship were and their answers were striking. "Say something in class. Your voice is important and we want to hear your opinions." "If I'm commenting in class on your work, I expect the same in return." "Please write substantive comments on the manuscript—don't just say this is good or this doesn't work; but articulate why." "Prioritize the class and invest the time; read the stories up for discussion carefully."

One of my students strongly suggested that the work should be "finished"—not "half-baked."

I get that. I had a friend, back in the 80s, who always put up stories that weren't complete. "I'm going to get reamed anyway, so—" This struck me as a negative attitude and a kind of self-defense armor—I don't want to get "hurt" so I don't want to put up my best. Put up your best. You owe it to yourself to take your work and yourself seriously as an artist.

I don't believe a story is ever finished, but at some point we're willing to let it go into the world. A workshop story should be something that you're proud of, that you think is almost ready to send out but you need some help with to get it ready for prime time.

Oh, and I allow students to submit excerpts from novels in progress. Of course, this is kind of tricky. One, the chapter might not be self-contained and that makes it hard to critique; and two, I don't want to be suggesting to the writer where the novel needs to go next. So a light touch is required.

My Workshop Etiquette

I don't believe a story should ever be half-baked. That, for me, leads to too much collaboration and a bunch of catchers getting a W or L next to their names. The writer is the pitcher. The rest of us are catchers. Know your roles.

In terms of making the workshop a safe place, we comment on the work, not the personality of the writer. Characters in a story don't have to be moral; they just have to be interesting.

In the 1980s a female student once said about one of my stories, "You know nothing about women." It really hurt. Okay, at the time, she was kind of right, but it wasn't something to say aloud or embarrass me about in front of my fellow writers. It was a personal attack. Well, I just want to make the writing better, she later said to me at one of those parties where us grad students got to take home all the leftover bread and cheese. Maybe her heart was in the right place, but the comment still stings, even now when I recall it some forty years later.

Another workshop colleague once called my prose style "prosaic." I didn't know what that word meant, but I recognized the disdain with which the comment was made. I looked up the word once the workshop was done and I was turbo pissed. Simple? Okay, at the time I was heavily influenced by Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, but the comment implied not just simple but "simple minded." I don't ever want to see this nonsense in a class I teach.

Respect your fellow writers. It takes guts to put your work out on Front Street. That's why, in my classes, we always applaud the writer and their work at the end of each workshop discussion. Moreover, the work is in me and I'm the work. What we write is personal and makes us very vulnerable. Keep that in mind when responding.

Kindness. I believe if you put positive energy into the universe you'll get it in return.

Maybe that's a little hey wow, but my Mom was into crystals, alternative medicines, Daoism. Deal.

Finally, I believe, a teacher should never be a gatekeeper. It's not my job to say who has it and who doesn't. Sure there are some people who have a greater facility with words and language, but I truly believe if you put in the time and effort and work on your craft you too can become a published author. I grade you against yourself, not against others in class. We're all on the road of storytelling. We're a community.

On Revision

For me, my stories fall under three revision categories: first draft ready; changing, restructuring, revising major sections; blowing the goddamn thing up.

First Draft Ready

About a quarter of my published stories were pretty close to first draft ready. By this I mean what I wrote in a white heat I stuck with. My impulses were good ones and I was in a state of flow. Any changes I made were cosmetic, adding a few details to enhance mood or nuances of dialogue, but the plot shape and narrative arc didn't change at all. Alice Munro, when interviewed by the Nobel Prize Committee, said she hardly revises her more recent stories. She's honed her craft, knows what she's doing, and trusts her instincts. The more you write, the closer you'll get to this kind of confidence, this feeling of being comfortable with uncertainty, knowing you'll *make* the story work.

I'm a bit of an unrepentant Beat Generation guy. Or, I should say, the myth of the Beats. First draft ready. Trust your instincts, go with your impulses. First thought, best thought.

Blow the Damn Thing Up

Sometimes my impulses suck. Bad choices. First thought, bad thought.

I'd say that one fourth of my published stories were ones I completely hit the reboot button on. I opened a new file and didn't even look at the older version. This approach came to me purely by accident. Literally. Some time in the 1980s my computer (a Leading Edge; yes, I'm dating myself) crashed and I lost the story I was hammering away on. I was bummed. But I didn't leave the room. I started over. From scratch. My next draft was so much better. Key scenes from the first draft re-emerged, but I wasn't stuck or beholden to my previous sentences, and choices. I made new discoveries.

And often this rebooted story, written in a white heat, is *new draft ready* (or close enough to send out). I can't explain it, but usually when I do the *blow the damn thing up* approach the subsequent drafts of the reboot don't take a lot of heavy lifting revising or mind bending rethinking ahead of their futures.

Needless to say, I turned this computer crashing experience into a productive ongoing revision strategy. My Master's thesis at Kansas State featured three stories and a critical apparatus. I eventually published all three of those stories in literary magazines. Of those three one was first draft ready and the other two were blown up. "Truth or Dare" was pretty much the same story I wrote in 1985 (it appeared in *Aethlon: the Journal of Sport Literature* in 1992). "Strike" was a revision of "Fair or Foul" and I switched the emotional register from twelve year olds to twenty-something graduate students. None of the details were the same. None of the sentences of the original were echoed in the revision, but the main seed of the story—girls quitting a baseball team because of the boys' sexism stayed at the heart of the new version "The Poem, 1969" became "Hockey Canada" and once again none of the sentences are echoed at all in the published version, but what remains

consistent, the throughline between the drafts, is the theme, the central conflict: a grandson rooting for Canada and what it means to be Canadian taking on his grandfather (who because of his Slavic ancestry is rooting for the Russians) and holding on to his Old Country ways.

Re-structuring, Revising, Rethinking

Half of my published stories go through this process. It's arduous and frustrating and difficult as I fiddle finding a lost impulse or a hidden inner story I've yet to discover. I believe (taking my lead from Ron Carlson) writers juggle variables and often in this revision process I have to eliminate a variable and possibly add some new ones. Sometimes a three scene story will evolve into a five or six scene story with more summary and interiority. Sometimes a theme or object in the background needs to be moved to the foreground. Sometimes what's in the foreground needs to be displaced, removed. Sometimes a minor character needs to become a major player.

Steven Schwartz once said that this kind of revision is accordion like. If you stretch a scene in the final phase of the story, you may need to adjust something at the front end of the story to now make the clubhouse turn work. Changing one aspect affects many other choices. It's not like you just fix one little thing here. No, this kind of revision often involves restructuring.

I find solving the riddles of these stories the most satisfying. Getting them right. Wow.

Process

I write my first draft fast and loose, like Eddie Felson playing pool (if you don't get that reference watch *The Hustler* with Paul Newman and read Walter Tevis's fine novel). I just want to get the yarn on the page without judgment. I shut off my censor and enter a zone that's full of excitement and surprise. In this stage of euphoria I tend to walk around the room saying, "I'm a genius."

Then, I put the draft aside for a few days. Let it cool off and begin the process of honestly accessing what's working and what's not working and thus begins the revising process. This is where I realize "I'm not all that and a bag of chips. Genius? Forget about it. Not even close." Sometimes, I even need to let the story sit for a year. Because, damn it, I can't fix it. At least not yet.

I've got a folder on my desktop called "No." It's full of over thirty failed stories that I've either abandoned or cobbled parts from for other stories that worked.

So what to do when I'm stuck? Or lost my way? Reading other fiction often helps me. I see how a writer solved a problem I'm having and I can borrow that craft choice and return to the work.

Moreover, devouring all kinds of narratives (I'm a junkie for the stuff from comic books to TV shows ["One Adam–12, roger"] to movies to crime novels to literary fiction to American drama) creates a filing system that's in the back of my head that I can unconsciously tap into while composing and placing my events in a causal chain.

I don't write every day. I wish I could, but I can't.

I have to feel it, you know? And if I'm not feeling it, I'm not feeling it.

You'll figure out your rhythms. Trust them. Don't do what others say you should do; do what works for you. For me, I'll write furiously for forty days or so and then take a breather and read, read, read, feeding the lake of ideas, readying for the next forty days of writing, revising, and writing.

Writing Communities

"The goal of the workshop is to get beyond the workshop," my mentor Ben Nyberg once said to me, and I embrace this. Writing is a solitary activity and the introvert in me digs it. It makes me happy. It's the most freeing feeling I ever experience in life just following impulses and enjoying the flow of the story's energetic engine.

But that's not to say I don't seek out help when I'm stuck. But, for me, you need to find readers you trust, who have earned the right to see your vulnerability. They're in the arena with you. They get you. It's hard to find these kinds of people. I have three whom I trust: Marc Dickinson, a former student of mine, a helluva writer, and the best reader, ever, someone who reads all stories diligently, carefully; Jeremy Schraffenberger, fellow editor and friend who empathizes with what I'm trying to achieve and enters into the spirit of my work; and my daughter Elizabeth Tracey, who's twice the writer I'll ever be. She points out my inconsistencies. And she's my sensitivity reader for my representations of queer characters.

When I was at Kansas State, the late Paul McCarthy, a soft-spoken professor of mine, said that in the 1950s, he was in the Iowa Writers Workshop. And every time a story of Flannery O'Connor's was up for discussion, she left the room in tears. "They just didn't get her." Who needs that shit? I don't want to be in a community of folks that don't get me.

I prefer being on my own. Well, that is until I'm truly stuck (which isn't that often). Thanks to Marc, Jeremy, and Elizabeth, Hall of Fame catchers all.

Literary Citizenship

It's important to put yourself in the arena. Go to readings. Support local writers. Buy their books. Get involved in a literary magazine, if you can, and read, read, read.

Visit local bookstores.

Also, invest in all of the arts. See plays. Go to art galleries. Don't stay locked in a box. Play guitar. Find things that you enjoy that free up your mind to create.

A few semesters ago, a talented YA writer, Jo Knowles, came to UNI, gave a great reading and several small talks on writing. Many tidbits of advice she gave I've taken up in my classes. Knowles said that for literary writers our world building centers around issues of power (who has it? who abuses it?). I love this advice, this way of thinking. The crime stories I write are invested in the melodramatic imagination, a world full of the powerful and the powerless.

The day Knowles came to visit my class, two of my most talented students didn't attend. I don't know. I never heard from them as to why they were missing. If they didn't attend because they thought a YA writer had nothing to offer them in terms of the craft, well then, that's very short-sighted. You can always learn something from leaning into other genres.

One of the most valuable workshops I ever took was a poetry workshop with Jonathan Holden. It helped me with my fiction, it taught me to pay greater attention to moment-by-moment language choices.

And I can't tell you how much acting has helped me with my writing, making me more present (listening for the choices my characters make) and creating more subtexts to my dialogue and forcing my attention on what do my characters want and what are they willing to do to get it?

So cross genre boundaries. Embrace hybridity. You'll be glad you did.

Politics and Writing

I'm all for it. As long as it's integrated into storytelling and not proselytizing. Stories are meant to entertain.

I have two sets of crime stories I'm currently writing and publishing: one involves former Toronto Maple Leaf turned private eye, Hayden Fuller, and the other features an upstate New York cab driver and Korean War–veteran, Eddie Sands. Both series are set in the mid-1960s.

This creates a doubleness.

I'm aware of the times I live in and the times I'm writing about. I can't be anachronistic. I can't have Hayden make a crack like telling a female client, "I apologize for my gender," but I can be aware of gender inequality and make sure my plots don't fall into pernicious stereotypes or promote what once was "acceptable" (William Campbell Gault in his 1960s novels often disparages the queer community; John D MacDonald, in his 1950s novels, at times, leans into domestic violence as a way to keep a wife in line).

With Eddie Sands I lean into issues of PTSD. He's a loner, a cab driver, and because of the horrors of war that he's directly experienced he wants to protect the traumatized from further trauma.

I care about social justice and so does my PI (in this way he's me). So my Fuller stories tackle abuse; of the young; of indigenous peoples (a knock at the door and aboriginal children of single mothers being marshaled off to residential schools); of unwed teen mothers. (under the Duplessis regime in Quebec single mothers and their children were cloistered away in asylums). I promote representations of women in positions of power (a superstar newspaper reporter; the head of the RCMP's counter-intelligence branch).

I also like to flip traditional gender binaries. Stana Younger, Hayden's former lover, begins the series as a lost love, slips into femme fatale mode, and then escapes this classification, becoming his lover again, and wife. I enjoyed playing with the dangerous female archetype and then thwarting expectations. No one can be defined around one truth. And I ultimately didn't want to embrace an all-too common trope of noir films and pulp fiction.

So, that's my spin as a writer placing myself in a somewhat irretrievable past. As a writer I want to move in the direction of being restorative.

On Publishing

What follows are some small pointers on publishing. My thoughts here are random and in a state of flow.

Cover letters

Three paragraphs. Intro: greetings; "please consider [title of your story] for publication in [title of journal], and maybe mention why you're submitting to the journal. Perhaps mention a story you read and liked that was recently published. Paragraph two: a bit about yourself; previous publications; interesting work you've done (perhaps involving community engagement); if you haven't been previously published perhaps mention that. Paragraph three: a call-to-action. "I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks."

Keep it short. Don't bloviate or brag. And never summarize or explain the story.

Near Misses

You got a near miss. An editor actually took time to say something nice about your work. Be encouraged. We don't do this often and when we do we really *do* want to see more of your work. But don't rush something off. Make sure it's your best. Wow us.

Requests from Agents

This happened to me once in my life. I got a story, "Addition," published in *South Dakota Review* and the Nat Sobel Agency wrote me a nice letter saying they admired my style, my craft, and wanted to see a novel, if I was working on one. Well, I was, and I rushed it off. Needless to say, it didn't make it past the first reader, who didn't read past the first chapter. I could tell because the novel was told from alternating third-person perspectives and there was no commentary of perspective two. Anyway, I never heard from the Nat Sobel Agency again.

Major bummer. My point? Don't rush the work. Make sure it's ready for prime time.

Where to send

I use DuoTrope as a search engine to find magazines to send to. Colleagues also suggest places that I should send my work.

I find I have to knock at the door a few times before an editor takes my work. So I like working with university publications and independents where the editorial staff is consistently the same. Some MFA–run magazines rotate editors every two–three years. I don't like sending to those kinds of journals because it often takes me two-three years just to convince an editor that my work kicks ass. And if they're gone in two–three years, I have to start the "ass-kicking" process all over again.

Submissions and All That

Most journals accept simultaneous submissions. I like to send out three copies of the same story. Three different magazines. As soon as one magazine rejects me I send to another one. Always have three copies of any story out in the world at a time. At least theoretically I try to do this.

Make sure you keep a log to track all your submissions. And once you get a story accepted, withdraw it from the other places it's in process. This is just good practice and good etiquette.

If a journal says no simultaneous submissions respect their policy. If you mess up and they find out you multiply submitted you could get blacklisted. You don't want to be that guy.

And if you enter a contest, make sure they say simultaneous submissions are okay. If not, either don't submit or only submit to the contest.

My Story's been Rejected Again and Again

Don't despair. This is part of the process. Most literary journals only take up to 1% of all submissions sent their way. That means a lot of stories I read are publishable but I can only take so many. So, if you believe in your story, keep sending it out to new places.

However, if you start having doubts about your story do the ten-percent rule. Edit down the story by ten percent. Tighten the prose. Send it back out.

And, in time, if that doesn't work and your doubts grow, linger, fester, honestly go back over the story and revise more radically. Ask a friend, a writer you trust, for advice. Seek their counsel (in the literary sense, not legal), and re-tool, re-think.

But if you're truly confident in the work. Ride out those rejections. Remember, it only takes one editor to dig you. You'll find that editor.

CHAPTER ONE

A Poetry State of Mind

“No matter how much pain it causes you to write the poem, while you are writing it you are actually happy.” – Louise Glück

Let’s begin with a paradigm.

Look at this photo.

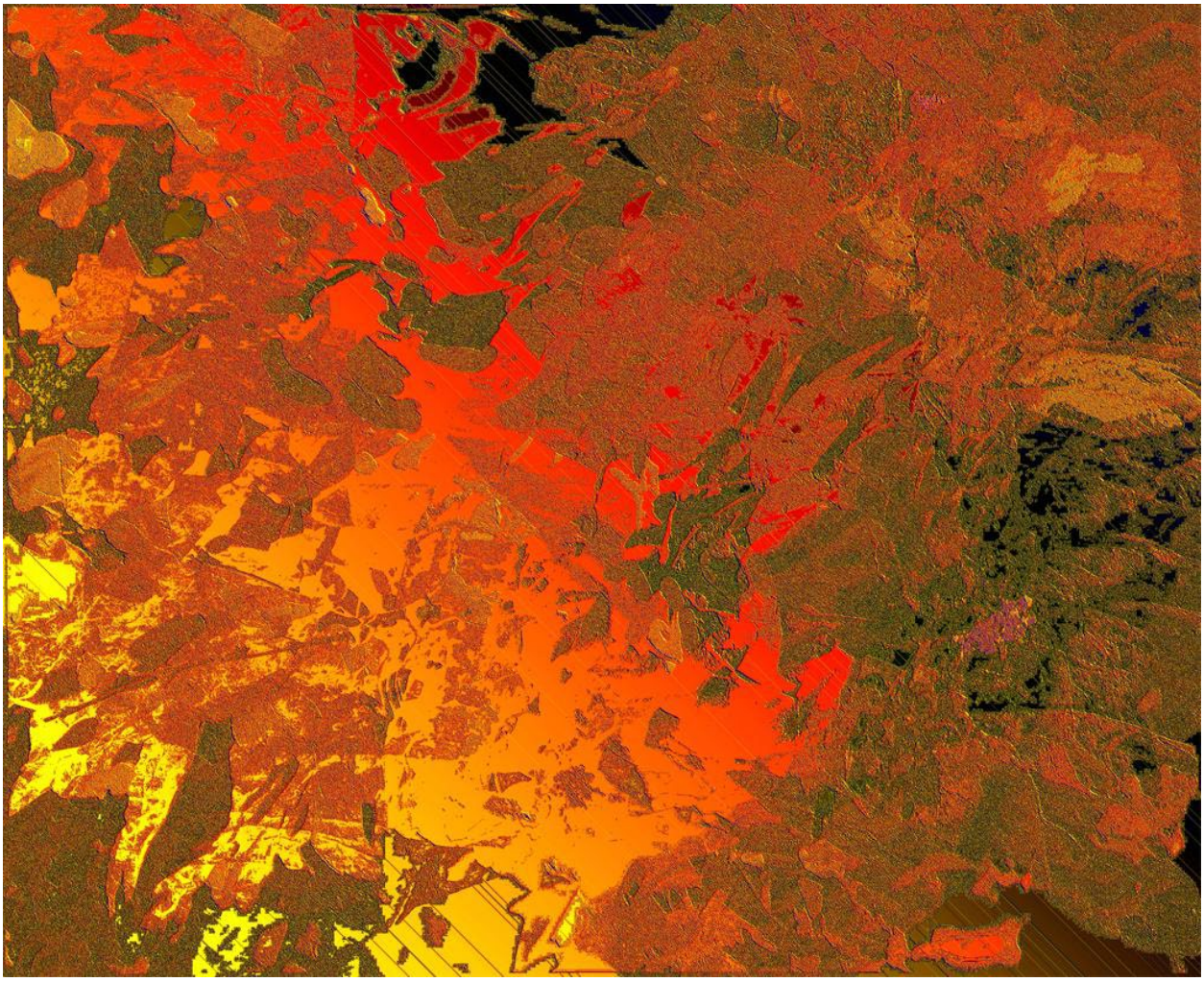
"The living room and bedroom of the Beeding Tollkeeper's cottage (built ca. 1808) at the Weald and Downland Museum" by Anguskirk is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

What do you know after looking at this image? What room in a house is this? What’s the time period? What’s the economic status of the people living here?

The table, brick oven, copper cooking pots all indicate that this is a kitchen. The candle sticks, mirrored candle sconce, an oven powered by wood, are evidence this room was built before electricity. Folks who know about antique pottery and furniture, could even more accurately

estimate the date; let's estimate it around the turn of the 19th century. The handmade rug and meager furniture all indicate the people who live in this cottage are of a modest, working class family. A setting, scene, and possibly characters are starting to emerge: *a young English woman enters the cottage, and walks purposefully to the corner by the oven. She drops the corners of her apron, which she's been holding to make a pocket and kendling falls amidst the logs lined on the wall*.

Now, look at this photo.



"arte astratta - abstract art - 40" by Raffaele1950 is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

What do you know after looking at this image? What room in a house is this? What's the time period? These aren't questions we can answer, because they are not askable questions about this piece. What do you see? Maybe fall leaves? Maybe it's a close up of a butterfly's wing. Are there two cats in the bottom left corner? Is it a fire? Of course, you've figured out that this is abstract art, so it will not represent a specific thing, but still, what's going on here? Instead of asking *what*, ask *why*. Here's a better set of questions: How do you react *to* or *with* the photo? What is this image doing *to* or *for* you? Simply put, how does this photo make you feel?

The image might evoke feelings of contentment or comfort, maybe even excitement because of its warmer color pallege and similarity to autumn foliage.

This paradigm is about the expectations we bring to reading fiction versus poetry. Think of looking at the first image like reading fiction. We have a time, setting, and characters. At the first words of a story, we start piecing together a narrative. The second picture is like reading a poem. If we try to force setting, characters, and scene onto a poem, we are asking questions that can't be answered, because they aren't relevant. Instead, ask what is the poem doing *to* or *for* me? How do I feel? What is the occasion–in other words, why was it written?

In his 1944 introduction to *The Wedge* William Carlos Williams wrote that "[a] poem is a small (or large) machine made out of words"; or "poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. Machines make or do things. Art should make or do things. Poems are tiny machines that make or do things to us. We've been conditioned to ask of poetry (and likely art in general) what it means or what it's about? But this question mainly yields a didactic engagement. For a dynamic engagement, ask how the poem or art is made.

The word "poetry" comes from the Greek "poesis," which means "to make," so a poet's job is to make. To make is to create, to bring something into existence. I recall an interview with Elizabeth Gilbert on the subject of creativity. She points out that our species is linked to creativity. She explains that in the past we had to make the threads to make our clothes, grow food, build our homes; in short, create everything we needed and wanted. Yet, in our modern world these activities have become consumer-based and transactional, but we have not lost our creative impulse. Writing is a creative impulse.

Why Write?

As an undergraduate, I entered school college with unexamined ambitions for a career in medicine, but after my first three semesters on this track, I wasn't engaged by the information. At an advising appointment for my third year, my wise advisor told me to take just one semester and sign up for everything opposite of my previous classes, so instead of chemistry and biology classes, I took art history, a survey of British literature, and it's how I wound up in my first creative writing with the poet Richard Jackson. I'd never been in a class where everyone was so engaged, conversant, and very serious about their work. We met every Monday might from 5-8, and I took Rick's workshop the rest of my time in undergrad. This class made poetry feel necessary, gave us a way to articulate human experience, provided us a way to make meaning, to belong.

In A Swim in a Pond in the Rain In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life, George Saunders maintains that writing makes him "more aware of the things of the world and more interested in them." In Graywolf's The Art of Series, Dean Young opens his craft collection *The Art of Recklessness* with this simple assertion, "Let us suppose

that everyone in the world wakes up today and tries to write a poem. It is impossible to know what will happen next but certainly we may be assured that the world will not be made worse [...] To write a poem is to explore the unknown capacities of the mind and the heart." Indeed, the writer will not likely yield a perfect poem in a day, maybe not even a good poem, but to attempt writing a poem is one of the more perfect ways to spend the day. It is a time machine, forward and backward, carrying the luggage, trinkets, our great loves and losses of our one life.

Why do you write? Regardless of why you're in this class, I suspect you have a curiosity about the world, that creative impulsive Gilbert described surfaces in words and stories for you. The poet Ralph Angel says, "Poetry has always existed and will always exist, because there will always be the need to say that which cannot be said." Poetry tries to capture the ineffable, and it's that ambitious pursuit of saying the impossible, word after word, that draws us to read and write poems. While you use this text, keep curious, chase what's ineffable, and keep making.

A Note on Notebooks

Take all notebook advice regarding what kind to use, how to use it, what time of day to use it, etc. with a grain of salt. Writers have *opinions* about notebooks. What's not up for discussion is whether or not to use a notebook. Use one. A notebook is a place where you record thoughts, ideas, inspiration, things you hear, things you want to look up, books you want to read, phrases you overheard or thought of, what you are reading, what you did that day, etc. I am religious, yet chaotic about notebooks. I start them in an extremely orderly and optimistic fashion, then about two weeks later, they look like I rescued them from the bottom of my thirteen year old's backpack. In a rush to record something, I have opened them to any random page and started writing. A page of potential titles is next to a grocery list, is next to a journal entry. I now accept this is how my mind words–cluster among chaos–so I take great delight in flipping from start to finish through a current notebook to find a phrase or draft that I want to experiment with.

The point is, keep a notebook, one that works for you. It does not matter if this is a series of post-its, your note apps, a pocket sized notebook you keep on your person, a spiral bound notebook you journal in at the same time each day, or any combination of these. Some writers are ritualistic, recording their daily actions in a Didionesque style, while others or more sporadic. Experiment with a few techniques: paper v. digital, scheduled v. sporadically, different kinds of notebooks to see what works with you. Just be honest with yourself and remember the point is, keep a notebook, one that works for you.

A Note on Writing Space

Like notebooks, writers also have *opinions* about where and when to write. The poet Billy Collins likes to write after waking up, before spoken conversations cloud this thinking. He uses the liminal space between wake and sleep and thinking language versus spoken language to

write at his desk in the morning or after a nap. Many poets report writing first thing in the morning, often waking up before others in their house to claim a few quiet hours. The fiction writer Michael Chabeon retreats to his basement and only emerges for a few hours at a time while working on a project. Many fiction writers do report retreating or isolating themselves while working on a novel, or something that is more plot or narrative driven. Some writers like to write in private, like at a desk in their own home, while others enjoy the vibe at a local coffee house and the public accountability. Find what works for you.

My writing is more inconsistent when I fit it into the small space I have left over while working full time as a single mother. I've found that if I save my writing time for the end of the day, I don't have as much creative energy to bring to the process. Virginia Woolf was correct in her essay, "A Room of One's Own." My writing is more consistent when I block off calendar and physical space. I now think of my writing time as a meeting I hold for my writing practice, so I mark my calendar as "busy." Accountability helps, too. I set up workshops, prompts, and virtual writing sessions with some fellow poets. I no longer write at the end of my dining room table, where I had to move projects daily to make room for dinner; I now write from a desk I purchased just to be my writing desk, and it's surrounded by books, papers, and knick-knacks that bring me joy. It's a space that I want to go to. It took me about twenty years to figure this out. I hope you figure it out sooner than I did. Experiment and find what works for you–a coffee house, a corner of your bed, or a cozy spot on the couch.

Speaker v. Poet

In poetry, the convention is that the poet writes a poem and the speaker is the persona or "character" that either speaks or lets the audience into their mind. Even if the poet is clearly writing an autobiographical poem, it's still the speaker who narrates or guides the poem. The poet is never the speaker, which should give the poet license to take bold risks. Take them.

First Person

In addition to "speaker," consider "person" and "point of view." A poem that uses the first person pronoun "I" is very different from a plural first person "we". Speaking from a plural position automatically includes a shared agency of action. The use of "I" could signal narrative or introspection or confession. Look how a pronoun, in this case, a first person singular "I," can change even the least narrative of poems, haiku. Issa (1763-1828) a haiku master, sometimes used "I," and the personal perspective adds humor. Here are a few haiku by Issa translated by Robert Hass.

Second Person

An email or letter has a specific audience, so does a poem. When second person "you" is used there is a kind of imperative, implied or stated, and there is also an audience. The *The Oxford*

*English Dictionary (*OED) says audience comes first from the Latin verb (audīre) meaning “to hear,” then refashioned through Old French (oiance) a noun meaning “attention to what is spoken.” Every poem, no matter if it uses first person, second person, third person, or no person has an implied or specific audience, but I mention audience in second person, because to use “you” is to construct a speaker and a hearer.

If a poem uses second person, pause to consider the audience. The OED also notes that audience, when used abstractly, is not plural, but this doesn’t mean one single listener. Is the audience one or many? Is the audience public or private? Intimate or formal? We certainly talk to a lover differently than a stranger in line at the store. External or internal? Rhetorical or real? Sometimes, the speaker of a poem may use “you” to refer to themselves, a kind of self-talk.

Another use of “you” is a kind of poem called a dramatic monologue where an imagined speaker addresses a listener, who is often silent. Robert Browning (1812-1889) is known for his dark and eerie dramatic monologues. Read his poem “My Last Duchess” to determine who is the speaker, the audience, and what’s being discussed and confessed. “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock,” by T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) is another common example of a dramatic monologue, but one more situated in the speaker’s internal anxieties and fears.

Third Person

When a poem uses third person: “he,” “she,” “it,” “they,” this is third person. As you read the poem published in the NAR below, take note of how the pronouns work.

Child Bed Fever by Kelly Rowe

The house grew quiet,
as a field grows winter.
The sycamore outside the window
leaned in close,
reaching with bare arms,
as a woman in a gray dress
leaned over the bed
to do her work.

The light rustle
of last leaves,
the rasp of a soapy rag,
moving back and forth
along an arm,
lifted, set down,
with what faith
in gentleness

could still be found.

In this poem, there is a woman and the pronoun, “her” is used once, in reference to the work of the woman tending to the new mother who is dying after childbirth from infection, then known as “childbed fever.” The arms of the sycamore, its leaves, and the weather outside have more action and agency than the two women in the poem. What’s the effect of this in the poem? Using third person allows the poet a number of options to tell someone’s story or shift focus to objects, moods, and things within a poem.

Sometimes, there’s no obvious speaker in a poem. Think of William Carlos Williams’ famous poem, “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Poems can be a kind of meditation, without an obvious sentient-speaker guiding the language.

Exercise 1: The List Poem

One of the simplest, yet consistently fruitful poetry prompts is the list exercise. The idea is to make a list and then use those items on your list in one poem. Once you’ve made a few lists of your own and written some poems from them, you’ll see why this is a generously generative prompt, and a good one to begin writing poetry.

Some common list poems ideas are: list ten things in your fridge right now and include them in a poem or list ten things in your writing space and use them in a poem.

You and a fellow poet can come up with a list together. Here is a list a writing partner and I created. Use these ten items in a poem:

- a word from a foreign language
- something you’d find on a map
- a color
- a body of water
- two adverbs
- a specific deciduous tree
- something you’ve burned (literal or figurative)
- a body part
- a day of the week
- the last thing you ate

Lastly, here is a list that I adapted from a writing retreat “Writing Poems With a Generous Heart Facing in Ten Directions” I took with Jane Hirshfield. This is a more complicated type of list poem because each list item includes 3-5 options, and the prompt establishes an objective for the list.

- 3-5 words or phrases from the poems

- 3-5 invented colors (for example, the color of a cat at night that you can't see)
- 3-5 sounds
- 3-5 smells
- 3-5 kinestic adjectives (kinestic relates knowing through feeling, for example, hot stones in summer
- 1 factual personal statement
- 3-5 places (not limited to geography, also think about places on the body)
- 3-5 living creatures
- 1 thing grand or precise that you are currently thinking about regarding gift giving
- Opposite concepts or feelings
- 3-5 objects in the natural world

Write a poem about a gift you have yet to receive or one you would like to give and include one item from each of the bulleted points.

Exercise 2: Go to your Notebook

This will be a multi-step prompt that you complete over a few days. If you have a writing notebook you already use, great. If not, establish one. Take your notebook and go outside and observe. You can sit in a park, go on a walk, sit on a public bench and notice what's around you. Record a list of the sensations you experience: touch, taste, sight, sound, smell. If you overhear someone say something odd or interesting, record it. If a strange tangle of language pops into your head, write it down. The point is to make a list of observations. You should do this a couple of times before your writing session.

A few days after you've completed your last observation, go to your writing place as described above if you already have one. If not, try out different spaces as you complete the exercises in this text to see what works for you. Use your observations from your notebook to complete a poem that uses the two truths and lie icebreaker. Except in this poem, imagine a speaker and include two lies and one truth about them.

Exercise 3: Dramatic Monologue

Few things are as freeing as living in the skin of another. Perhaps this is why we go on vacation, watch films, read, dress up, post on social media. For this exercise, free yourself by writing a dramatic monologue, which is an imagined speaker addressing a silent audience. You create the speaker and the audience.

The key to a dramatic monologue is to think about occasion and space. Also, as a poet, what's the farthest speaker's voice you're willing to inhabit? Where are they? What are they saying, asking, confessing, demanding, silencing?

Why is the speaker speaking? To whom are they speaking? Is it a public or private audience? Who is listening: one or many? How well does the speaker know their audience? Why is she talking to them now? Does he have control of the scene or not?

What's the medium? Is this spoken or written? If it is written, where: email, letter, text, legal document? If it is spoken: is it a speech, a conversation, recorded? Is it a dialogue, and if so, how do we hear the other?The conversation?

CHAPTER TWO

The Architecture of a Poem

"It's much easier to write a good poem than a good line." - Robert Lowell

As a kid, I loved spending time at my friend's Kerry's house because she had LEGOs galore. She was always sketching or building something. Kerry is now an architect and specializes in door lintels, which tracks, because even as a child, she studied how things were built. As an architect looks at a building and thinks: angles, square feet, building materials, so should a writer look at a novel, a poem, and even sentences, and think: syntax, pacing, word choice. A poet studies other poems to see how they are built, and then builds their own. Conduct surgery on your favorite poems. Cut them open and see how they are made. Count the words, note the diction. How do the lines move?

In the classification of prose versus poetry, a broad designation is that poetry is written with line breaks–often employing meter or rhythm–and prose is pretty much everything else. The Romantic poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, offered this somewhat snarky definition of poetry in 1827: "Prose: words in their best order; poetry: the best words in the best order."

Of course, the differences become more nuanced with further discussion. Prose tends to convey its ideas in sentences that follow grammatical rules and the sentences run from margin to margin. Whereas poetry can experiment with rules of grammar, omit grammar altogether, and use line breaks. The work of American poet, E. E. Cummings is a traditional example of how poetry can expand notions of language and meaning by disregarding or playing with spacing and grammar.

Anatomy of a poem

Most broadly speaking, a poem is both white space (the page) and the black space (the text). The space between the lines, stanzas, and words, are also part of the poem. Usually, contemporary poets left-justify their work on the page, whereas a center-justified line is mostly obsolete, an unexamined assumption about poetry by a beginning writer. If you're going to center justify your poems on the page, have a good reason for doing so. Some poets, even in a portrait-aligned book, will have a section of work with landscape orientation or with pages that fold out, extending the available page space because they are thinking about how the page and poem influence each other's shape. The page is mutable, and defined by the poet, just as the space between letters in words is.

At the *North American Review*, we work practicum students to produce the magazine, and I know they silently curse me when I accept a poem that doesn't use the automatic space between the words, but rather expands and collapses the white space between words, because

in layout of the magazine, we're often adjusting pica. Pica is a finite measurement in printing magazines and newspapers that mark columns. A pica is just under ⅙ of an inch and there are 12 points in a pica, 72 points in one inch. Minutia, perhaps, but poets think of the spaces between words as part of the poem, too. Below is a poem we published in 2019 by Katie Prince. The image of her poem "poem in a cold war hellscape" is from our proofing pages and shows such spaces between words. Look at how these longer spaces between words and sentences function. In the third line, there is a heavy pause after "nuclear annihilation," which indicates a type of eradication. In the fourth line, there is a long space after "reeling in," creating anticipation for what is at the end of the fishing rod. In the last line there are spaces on both sides of "unexploded," just as we'd give a wide berth to an undetonated bomb.

■

KATIE PRINCE

poem in a cold war hellscape

an apocalypse of sorts: beachfront bunker, undead.
the fishermen full of hope for a catch. soggy
leather, trash, nuclear annihilation. we are all
fishing these days, and reeling in an eyeball,
maybe, a strip of neighbor's cheek. someone
set the lions loose from the zoo. they prowl
like kings, take down anyone with a spot of blood
seeping through. the lookout tower has been bombed
to bits. all fear unexploded. all quiet. all new.

To get better acquainted with how to discuss poems and write them, knowing what the parts of a poem are is necessary. Let's dissect the poem below, by Katie Farris, which first appeared in the pages of the NAR. Use the annotations feature to read about each part of the poem.

In Memory of Polish Poet Zbigniew Herbert's Visit Los, Angeles, 1971 by Katie Farris

You cannot save this city; you must burn it
—Z. Herbert

When he came back to our free union,
which is to say America, which is to say
home,
he was already gone.

He dusted the crown
moldings looking for fingerprints,
or more vivid evidences, perhaps an
insurgent, perhaps an
arsenal.

Since he returned to our free
union he kept his mouth inside
his pants' pocket,
and his keys sometimes
chipped his teeth, and this grin
embarrassed us.

He lost reality; he sat oftentimes abruptly
down, and splintered chair
after chair

shouting from his pants'
pocket to Be careful!
Get down!

We looked at him
when he shouted like that.

We would have taken him back,
but he was already gone—
gumming benchbacks in public
parks, knocking on windows

with his forehead, a balding
bumblebee.

Stanzas

In prose writing, the convention is each paragraph works through its own idea. When a new idea is introduced, it gets a new paragraph. Stanzas in poetry move in a similar way, and it's worth glossing that "la stanza" in Italian means "room." Rooms in houses have different purposes: you cook in the kitchen, sleep in the bedroom, socialize in the living room, etc. Similarly, stanzas in poetry have different purposes: to disclose a speaker's feelings, a speaker's change of perspective, to provide imagery, etc. Many college students, who start seriously reading poetry, can become frustrated, particularly if they find a poem obtuse, or difficult to understand, and give up too early on poetry. A way to correct an obtuse reading experience is to step back from the poem and read it stanza by stanza. This way, the reader can trace the argument and tension of the poem, as well as the speaker's attitude as it changes.

Take Ezra Pound's poem, inspired by Li Po, "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter." Using the reading questions from the previous chapter: What is the occasion? Who is the speaker? To whom are they speaking? How does this poem make you feel? What can you establish? read the poem stanza by stanza. After each stanza, pause and ask these questions. Use the paradigm of each stanza as room. What does each stanza reveal about the speaker's situation? Her feelings about her husband? His presence? His absence?

In the first stanza the girl is an innocent, playful child. She is married to her "Lord" at fourteen and becomes shy and reclusive. In the next stanza, when she is fifteen, she is swept up in teenage passion: "I desired my dust to be mingled with yours." In the third stanza, he leaves for work, and she mourns his absence. She begins the last stanza, noting her loneliness, "[b]y the gate now, the moss is grown," meaning he's not returned and she is growing older while alone at home, just waiting. A stanza can also be a stance–a kind of rhetorical reasoning–especially in a narrative poem, and by the end of this poem, the wife has grown ambivalent toward her absent husband, only willing to meet him so far if he returns from his journey.

Try the stanza by stanza reading with Shannon Ballam's poem, "The baby pig," which was a finalist in the *North American Review*'s James Hearst Poetry Prize. You'll notice that the title leads into the first line. How does this set up or subvert your expectations as you begin the poem?

The baby pig by Shannon Ballam

for Dave Lee

floated in a jar
of formaldehyde
in the fifth grade
science classroom.

Her face was so lonely,

eyes like elegant
brushstrokes on china,
mouth a fine gray line
curved into a sorrowful smile,
wrinkled snout no bigger
than a dime.
Her umbilical cord twisted
like a honeysuckle vine,
belly stippled with two rows
of nipples, and through
her nearly transparent skin
Stibbs saw her heart,
a ripe cherry,
pulse and shine.

He stuffed the jar inside
his coat. It stuck out
like a pregnant belly.

He crafted a nest
of quilts and sticks,
blue heating pad in the center,
and hunkered over the jar
as if is were an egg,
folding his arms along
his sides like wings,
scowling into the sunset,
concentrating hard
to sprout feathers
and a beak.
He would fly
them both away
and they'd be free.

When she was born,
he would name her Beauty.

The first stanza is an image of a pig in a jar, taken from a typical science unit on dissection. The second stanza zooms in and makes this death artifact a thing of beauty and introduces the empathetic, if somewhat simple, Stubbs. Quickly, in the third, Stubbs steals the pig and symbolically becomes its pregnant mother. The fourth stanza mimics the language of hope, nature, and life, used in the second, and the last stanza is a couplet, a kind of volta that turns the poem, and we hope–the same way Stubbs does–that the pig will be born through this act of love and hope. At first, we might pity Stubb's ignorance, but as the poem goes on, we root for

Stubb's hope; it's contagious. We want it to be true. Stubbs is no longer a simpleton, but a seer for hope.

What about poems that don't use stanzas? Does this mean that the ideas don't break or change? No! You'll recall Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess" from the previous chapter, which was written in one long stanza, as the braggadocious and jealous speaker's ego went on and on about his precious art and "too soon made glad" late wife. He is changing the subject all over the place, but the fact that it's written in one long stanza with no breaks indicates the pompousness of the speaker as he goes on and on.

Forms can also indicate where a stanza is broken or not; for example, a sestina will usually have six lines in each stanza, whereas a sonnet is written in one block. As you become more familiar with a variety of forms, note where the stanza break and why. Often, a stanza break in form is mark the end and subsequent beginning of a rhyming pattern.

Line and Line Breaks

In formal verse, it is syllable count (haiku), rhyme (ballads), or meter (Petrarchan sonnet) that determines the line length, but in free verse, what determines the line length is more variable. Poets have different thoughts and aesthetics when it comes to line length. Some poets, like Charles Wright, have a long sense of the line, while others like Robert Creely (1926–2005) have a shorter sense of the line. Outside of meter, I believe biology can be a major influence on the sense of line. A heart beat, likely the first thing we feel or hear while inside our mothers, is iambic, the *ba-boom*, is an iambic pattern (unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable) and is very similar to the *lub-dub* of a human heart. Patterns of biological sounds are all around us. Some poets determine their line length based on what can be said in one breath. Others consider a line a unit of thought. A common way of thinking of a line of poetry is as a "unit of attention."

Lines can also be decided with systems of order, such as grammar: phrases, clauses, or sentences. Spatial order is another organizational system, with lines roughly the same length. One of my longtime writing teachers, Richard Jackson, claimed he could look at a poem and based on its line length, determine its success, meaning if the line breaks are wildly varied without rhyme or reason, the poet was not successful in picking a governing aesthetic to determine line length within a poem, and therefore didn't write a good poem.

Outside of meter, determining where to put a line is a major choice a poet faces. Will the line breaks follow conventional grammatical rules? Will the poet use breath, grammar, or structure to organize? Will the poet disrupt a reader's expectation about where a line gets broken? For a quick primer on how an unexpected line break can make a poem, read "A Blessing" by James Wright (1927-1980) with special attention to how the last two lines of the poem are organized.

Like in many art forms, poetry also gains ground by subverting an audience's expectations. Gerald Manly Hopkins' (1844–1889) notion of sprung rhythm or Emily Dickinson's (1830–1886) poems blooming with em dashes come to mind. More contemporary methods of word processing and printing have opened up this disruption even more with concrete poetry, strikethroughs, forward slashes, landscape page orientation, and even emojis.

As you read a poem, see if you can determine what guides each poet's sense of a line. Do they let the image lead the line? What about breath? Grammatical structures? The page? Do they subvert grammar, units of thoughts? Just as a poet finds their voice through imitation, experimentation, and practice, they also find their own sense of the line.

Traditionally, poems have had about ten syllables, because iambic pentameter was more or less the norm. Notably, a roughly iambic line is what most people are comfortable speaking outloud on one breath. Below is a poem from the NAR, and its short lines, mostly in the range of two to four syllables, move swiftly, but also with the staccato disruption of shorter lines. You'll also notice that the poem does not use grammar and uses an ampersand "&" instead of the word "and." Read the poem out loud and note how the experience is different from reading a poem by Robert Frost or Shakespeare.

Emily as Night by Darren C. Demaree

for Etel Adnan

Right now
no one
can see us

in the ravine
behind the lost
paleness

of Ohio
& since we
are unlatched

from the poor
reality of how
we could be

witnessed
the world becomes
a table

that cannot
starve amidst
our display.

Epic, Lyric, Narrative

Epic poems are long (book-length long) poems often recounting the gallantry of wars and their heroes, and while most epics belong to history (*Beowulf*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*) some contemporary poets do experiment with the form, but the epic is not currently fashionable. Narrative poetry is driven by a speaker who is telling a story. Most contemporary poets work with the lyric, a kind of kind of meditation, even celebration of the present. Lyric poetry as a long association with musicality and meditation. In workshop, I recall one of my teachers, Robert Hass, telling a student, albeit generously, that the student was misusing the impulse of prayer in his poem. Hass closed with a sage and earnest statement, “I’ve thought a lot about prayer.” In Hass’s recent book *On Form*, he operates from his thesis, “the impulse of prayer seems to be very near the origin of the lyric.” So true, a prayer can be a plea, a deathbed bargain, thankfulness and contentment, a shout of joy. The lyric is all these impulses, too.

Exercise 1: Break the Lines

The NAR published Kwame Dawe’s poem, “How to Dream.” The poem is one long sentence and uses the repeated phrase of “we who.” The poem is reprinted below, but with the line breaks removed. Copy and paste the poem so that you can digitally edit it and start making the line breaks where you think they should occur. Notice what choices you’re making. Why are you breaking the line where you do? What is a guiding principle you’re using to make decisions? Are you breaking the line at each semicolon because it seems like a natural stop? Does each line start with “we who” because it’s like the poet is using anaphora, the repetition of a word or phrase at the start of lines. Once you’ve made your choices, compare your line breaks with other students. What choices did they make and more importantly how do differing line breaks make the “same” poem different?

Make sure to compare your line breaks to the ones Kwame Dawes intended. His poem, along with all the others used in this text are in the poetry resources section of this book.

How to Dream by Kwame Dawes

We who live with the streets at our ear, the flimsy zinc to guard us from predators; we who gather in kerosene light to hear the sweating politician promise us bread and the dignity of a manifesto made of our blood; we who rest our bodies on the unrolled mats, the yeast smell of dough warming to a swell overnight in the heat, the wood-smoke rising in the mud oven where embers glow waiting for dawn; we who know the lamentation of the wind in trees, or the giddy

industry of a bicycle's wheels ticking through the night; we who bathe in the algae-covered slate of concrete, water flowing in a single line over our bodies; we who cover our bodies in talc, our forehead with Limacol, the backs of our necks with rosewater; we who leave our Sunday garments to wave like flags in the wind; we who sleep to the soft quarreling of Kwaku the postman, *(Jesus I'm drunk, drunk, drunk, my body can't work, oh no, Ama, Ama, Ama, Ama Ama…*); we pray as if there is mercy in the hills, from whence cometh our help; we give thanks for the music in this, for the soft hope in these streets f of standing water, for bodies softly opening to us as a song of the sea, for women with kindness in their eyes, and for our rooms anointed with the green incense of burning mosquito coils.

Exercise 2: One Liners

From an early age of three, four, five, or six, we're taught how to read, paying full attention to grammar and its traffic-coping–a small pause at a comma and a full breath at a period, possessive versus plural, when to use a semicolon, etc. Grammar and standardized-spelling were relative late comers to written language, but their presence is loud and likely permanent. In poetry, line breaks, neologism, and experimental verse, like that of E.E. Cummings, Jos Charles, and Darren C. Demaree allows for some play and progression. Below are a few poetry prompts that use the idea of grammar (or not) to influence the lines and stanza-making. Try at least two: the one you're most drawn to and the one you're most resistant to.

- Write a poem that is one sentence.
- Write a poem that is a question.
- Write a poem that uses no punctuation marks.
- Write a poem in unrhymed couplets.
- Write a prose poem

Exercise 3: Enjambment and End-stopped

For this exercise you can work with a poem you'd like to revise, use one of the list prompts from the previous chapter, or if the muse is visiting you, something you write for this prompt. Either way, write the first version of the poem using mostly enjambment, where there is no punctuation at the end of the lines. Write the other version with mostly end-stopped lines. Of course, you will need to change some words and phrases to coordinate with enjambed lines and end-stopped lines. Read the two poems and consider how the meaning is changed using each convention.

CHAPTER THREE

Sound

“Though it seems, at first, like an art of speaking, poetry is an art of listening.” - Craig Morgan Teicher

Sound is biological. We are bathed in it before we’re born; create spoken languages; compose and listen to music. If a song comes on that you like, you might start singing along, not even realizing how many of the lyrics you know. But, when was the last time you started reciting a familiar written document like a chapter from your favorite book or a letter? Because of tone, rhythm, and rhyme, music is more easily memorized and recalled. It’s really a series of patterns formed by rhythm, sound, and sometimes rhyme.

Poetry's evolution from music results in its riches of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, and is pinned to poetry’s very lyric impulse. Sound play is one of the delights of listening to and writing poems. When a poet works well with sound, it’s said that they “have a good ear,” meaning they can bring to the surface subtle work with sound.

Just how important is sound in poetry? You might be familiar with the children’s poem “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll (1832–1898). There is the made up creature, a “Jabberwock” with “eyes of flame,” and some kind of altercation happens in the poem. A good portion of the poem contains nonsense words such as “vorpal,” “uffish,” and “brillig.” However, when read to children, they swear they can follow the action. When my children were young and I read it to them, they described the epic battle between a red dragon and a knight. The words may be nonsense, but what reading this poem out loud illustrates is that sound has meaning independent of the words.

Rhyme

Some consider rhyme to be almost synonymous with poetry. Historically, most verse was written in rhyme. Across many cultures and time periods, and artistic movements, poetry rhymed. However, writing strictly rhyming verse is not something many contemporary poets practice. Many students who are new to poetry assume that poems are supposed to rhyme, perhaps because they were taught older poems by a well-meaning secondary teacher as they covered a requisite unit of poetry and rhyme.

I often tell my students that no art is made in a vacuum. Art is both a mirror and criticism of the culture in which it’s created. At the turn of the 20th century, many movements within the Modernist era were wildly experimental, and privileged expression over meaning. It’s no wonder art takes a wild turn, so does the world, as it enters a period of rapid change. The fields of chemistry and medicine move forward, electricity is harnessed. Automobiles, airplanes,

telephones, to name a few devices, are invented. The world stage is set for the first of two world wars. In visual art, the works of Salvador Dalí and surrealism, as well as Pablo Picasso and Cubism come to mind. Literature is no exception. Rhyming poetry begins to fall out of fashion, aided by the influence of the French poet, Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) and expat American poets Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) introduce exciting new verse that doesn't rhyme. By the 1950s the Beat poets had all but put most rhyming poetry to bed, yet rhyme isn't dead. Rhyme is still very much a part of formal verse and slant and half rhyme at the end of lines, as well as the middle of lines is common and adds a delight for the ear.

If you think all poems must rhyme, please reexamine this notion. This is not to say that poems can't or shouldn't rhyme. In fact, we'll cover rhyming forms in chapter five, and writing in form is an important practice for poets. This is to say, that if you insist on using only rhyme, be aware of the consequences. If you work with rhyme, what drives the decision for each line is a specific ending sound for the line. If your line is, "Across the night prairie, an aching moon," then the next line you write will be searching for a sound that rhymes with "moon": loon, dragoon, so soon, etc. So when you're searching for the rhyming sound, finding that sound becomes the dominant driver for the next line, which means you could become closed down to figurative opportunities, wild images, or a surprise turn that occurs when your focus is on making the last syllable of words rhyme.

Rhythm and Meter

You don't see rhythm on the page, you hear it when you read the poem, especially if you read out loud. Rhythm is an audible pattern created by intervals between stressed syllables. English is a syllabic language, meaning some syllables are stressed and others unstressed. For comparison, other languages, such as Mandarin, are a pitch-based language, so the meaning of the word is derived from the pitch or register at which the syllables are spoken. In polysyllabic words (words with more than one syllable), one syllable receives more stress than the others. The easiest way to count syllables is to say the word out loud and each drop of your chin indicates a new syllable. If you say *hotel*, your chin drops at the "h" and "t," so the word "hotel" is composed of two syllables. Across a line of verse a pattern of accented syllables emerge across all words, whether monosyllabic (meaning one syllable) or polysyllabic.

Meter is a measurable rhythmic pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of verse. When measuring meter, better known as scansion, look for two things: the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, this is called a metrical foot. Secondly, count how many feet are in a line. There are names for these feet. As we look at the feet, this mark ‘ will represent a stressed syllable (think of it as the beat of a drum, using the sound *boom*) and this mark ˘ will represent an unstressed syllable (think of the soft *ba* of a lamb).

Below are the metrical feet

- Iamb is a two syllable foot with the pattern of unstressed and stressed: ˘ ‘ (ba-boom) Note: Iambs or an iambic rhythm is the most common foot in English. Again, I think this is biological, as an iamb, ba-boom, imitates the lub-dub of a human heart.
- Trochee is a two syllable foot with the pattern of stressed and unstressed: ‘ ˘ (boom-ba)
- Spondee is a two syllable foot with the pattern of stressed and stressed. Note: this is not a common foot, and when it appears, it is usually in the beginning, middle, or end of the line: ‘ ‘ (boom-boom)
- Anapest is a three syllable foot with a pattern of unstressed, unstressed, and stressed: ˘ ˘ ‘ **(**ba ba boom)
- Dactyl is a three syllable foot with a pattern of stressed, unstressed, unstressed: ‘ ˘ ˘ (boom ba ba) and it’s worth noting that this is also a pretty rare foot, but appears more so than a spondee.

Once you’ve determined what the metrical feet are, next determine how many there are in a line of verse. Recalling the Greek prefixes from geometry class will come in handy for this: *mono* for one foot in a line of poetry, *di* for two, *tri* for three, *tetra* for four, *penta* for five, *hexa* for six, *octa* for eight. It is convention to use a forward slash to mark the feet. Below is what scansion looks like in a line of poetry, from Shakespeare’s famous Sonnet 130. You’ll notice that there are five feet and they are all iambs, creating a line of unrhymed (because it does not rhyme with the following line in the sonnet) of unrhymed iambic pentameter.

˘ ‘ / ˘ ‘ / ˘ ‘ / ˘ ‘ / ˘ ‘
My mis/tress' eyes/ are no/thing like/the sun;

Poets.org has a comprehensive and understandable resource to read on meter.

Vowels vs. Consonants

The difference between how we pronounce a vowel sound versus a consonant are substantial. To pronounce vowel sounds (go ahead and try and notice what your tongue and lips are doing: *a e i o u y*) the sound is created by the tongue and lips’ movement, no teeth are involved. To pronounce consonants, there are more movements involved, often with lips, teeth, and varied air flow. There are voiced and voiceless consonants; for example the “th” at the end of “teeth” is voiceless and the tongue goes through the teeth to make this sound, whereas the “th” in the word “the” is voiced and stays behind the teeth. To make a “b” or “p” sound, a plosive, you have to put your lips together and force air out as you open your mouth. To make “f” or “v” sound, a fricative, your top teeth touch your bottom lip and you have to vibrate air through this space. There are many more delightful categories for English phonetics and phonology, but the paradoxical take away for poetry is that consonant sounds slow a word down, since there’s more work to do to make the sound, whereas vowels speed up a word.

Say “bat,” and you’ll notice the consonant starting and ending require more mouth movements and thus more time to say the word. Now say “oar,” a word that’s two-thirds vowels, and without stops between the teeth and tongue, the word is quicker to say. Vowels are often described as liquid and constants as a stop; think of languid pouring versus the bump at an encounter.

Another paradox is that polysyllabic words are quicker to say, whereas monosyllabic words slow a line down. You would think that shorter words, those with one syllable, would move faster, but they don’t because there’s more stopping and starting to say the words, so a line of poetry with many monosyllables is a slower line. Take a look at these two five syllable lines from the same poem “The baby pig” by Shannon Ballam from a previous chapter.

monosyllabic line: *his coat. It stuck out*
polysyllabic line: *concentrating hard*

You probably noticed that in the monosyllabic line, three of the five words ended with the hard sound of “t.” In a reading she gave at UCLA, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Kay Ryan said, “Every word brings it kith and kin,” and of course this means synonyms, but also words with similar sounds, like the short words from Ballam’s line that end in “t.” Poetry’s early connection to music is still apparent in vestiges of rhyme, meter, verse, and other sonic qualities, even the sounds of letters in the words a poet chooses.

Sonic Literary Devices

There are literary devices related to sound, which also help create rhythm in poetry. Anglo-Saxon poetry is filled with alliteration, which was more of a guiding aesthetic than rhyme. Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds, usually in the beginning of the word or the accented syllable. Let’s look at “The baby pig" by Shannon Ballam again. Here is a line with two bits of alliteration, “s” followed by “h,” “Stubbs saw her heart.”

Assonance is the repetition of similar vowel sounds in close proximity, and usually these vowel sounds are in the middle of words. Here’s an example from Ballam’s poem, where you’ll hear the long “i” in “fine” and “line,” as well as a long “a” in “a” and “gray,” “mouth a fine gray line.” Assonance is a subtle sonic device, but worth tuning your ear toward.

Onomatopoeia is a word formed from the sound it describes; for example, the sizzle of hot oil in a pan. To say “sizzle” sounds like the action of the hot oil. Many children’s books use onomatopoeia: the buzz of a bee, the ba of a lamb, likely because imitating these sounds is closely connected to language acquisition. Used in poetry, a just right onomatopoeia is arresting, as in Dickinson’s famous poem 591 with the eponymous title and first line: “I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -”.

Poets often speak of having a “good ear,” which means attention to sound. The more you read and write, the better tuned your ear will become. Poetry is meant to be read out loud, so next

time you're reading a poem, perhaps the ones in this text, read a few outloud and listen to the sounds.

Exercise 1: Scan & Mimic

Think of a poem that has caught your ear. Even a line or two from this poem suffices. Look up the poem and write or type it out. One of my teachers, Dean Young, insisted on the practice of typing out his favorite poems, as well as his drafts, on a typewriter. The typewriter is a literal rhythm. Do your best to scan the poem. You will recall that most feet are iambic. Identify the metrical feet and count how many feet there are per line to determine the pattern. Mimic the scansion in the poem you will write. Also, feel free to borrow from other sound play. Use alliteration and assonance. Repeat or introduce an expected rhyme.

Exercise 2: Tune your Ear

Most writers keep some kind of notebook, whether it's post-its on a nightstand, a moleskin in a pocket or purse, the notes app on their phone, or something more formal. I once taught a creative writing class using the Observer's Notebook Series, which offers notebooks to observe weather, home, birds, a garden, etc. The idea was to observe and record, to really get into the Beginner's Mindset as it connects to writing. Go to your notebook and gather a few lines that interest you. Let these lines start a poem and let the words in the lines invite their sonic "kith and kin." Think of rhythm, rhyme, meter, alliteration, assonance, syllable count, vowel versus consonants. The words don't have to make sense per se, you're selecting them for sound. If you don't keep a notebook yet, borrow a few lines from the ones my students and I recorded in our Observer Notebooks from the weather series below.

- the wind carried the snowflakes upwards
- alto-cumulus afternoon
- a lasting power of a happy childhood
- cloud blanket of all the grays
- this marriage of sunrise
- sudden nothing, then bursts of wind
- anatomy of a tornado
- he saw only anvils in the sky
- we saw each other, but did not understand
- historical magic

Exercise 3: Focus on the Vowels

When I first learned of *Gadsby*, a 1939 novel written by Ernest Vincent Wright without using the letter "e," the most common letter in the English language, I can't say I was compelled to read it, but the exercise was intriguing. For this exercise, focus on the vowels in your poem. Assonance often gets second fiddle to alliteration, perhaps because the repeated sound is inside the word,

rather than at the beginning. The sounds in the middle are inherently more subtle. Remember that vowels, compared to consonants, lengthen a line, so this is an opportunity to work with long, liquid lines.

CHAPTER FOUR

Inspiration and Risk

“Breathe in experience, breathe out poetry.” -Muriel Rukeyer

Years after I left her classroom, I attended a reading by one of my teachers and mentors, Brenda Hillman. Toward the end of her reading, she asked us all to pause and take a deep inhalation of breath and then a voiced exhalation before she read a poem.

“Do me a favor,” she asked in her chirpy voice. “Breathe in fully and stop when your lungs are full at the top of your breath. You have completed inspiration. Now, exhale forcefully through your nostrils. You have completed exhalation.” The poem she read was inspired by seeing lichen on a hike, and she wanted her audience to be part of the poem, just as the lichen was part of the tree and the tree part of the lichen, so she included the audience in its inspiration. Hillman took a risk by asking the audience to vocalize breath before a poem. In fact, one surly poet in the audience chortled, and she chimed, “Yes, even you [__], breathe.” And he did.

The act of creativity or inspiration is tied to inhalation. The OED says that “inspire” comes from the Latin (inspīrāre) meaning “to blow or breathe into.” The act of inspiration, in biology and art, is life sustaining.

Hillman, perhaps because she is also an advocate, is no stranger to risk. In *Loose Sugar* she has snippets of stanzas that appear in the margins of the pages. She called these phrases, “verbal drippings,” and explains that when writing the poem, she knew these words belonged on the page, but not in the poem. Courageously, she explored the parameters of a poem and a page.

Risk and Routine

There is a paradox in risk and routine. One cannot exist without the other. You take a risk to break out of a routine. Sometimes we stay in a routine to avoid risk. In writing, both are important. If you take your writing seriously, you will establish a routine for your practice. As you write, if you become bored with the process or product or start to worry that you sound too much like yourself, then take a risk. Try using a form you normally wouldn’t, begin your poem in an odd way, or use a writing prompt. Do something out of the ordinary for you.

Reading is another way to take a risk. I have yet to meet a serious writer who doesn’t read like the act of breathing. I’ve found a process of reading that worked so well to get me out of a writing rut, that I now routinely read this way. I alternate what I read. I typically start with a poet whose work I know well, one my “touchstone” poets or a poet whose aesthetic or voice is similar to mine followed by a poet who is new to me or someone whose work is deeply different from

mine. The dichotomy between the reading experiences is deeply satisfying, and opens new ways of using language and perception.

Additionally, there are many books written to inspire young artists at the start of their journey. One of these quintessential texts is *Letters To A Young Poet* by the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926). Rilke's passion for living and writing leap off the page, even over a century later, "I would like to beg you [...] to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now."

There are many resources for writers, and libraries or used book shops are a great place to preview them and decide which ones speak to you. The takeaway is this: a writer is always reading. Here are a few books that have resonated with me and my students. This is not an exhaustive list, just a place to begin.

- *Ordinary Genius: A Guide for the Poet Within* by Kim Addonizio
- *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* by Edward Hirsch
- *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* by Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux
- *A Poetry Handbook Paperback* by Mary Oliver
- *A Primer for Poets and Readers of Poetry* by Gregory Orr

Tension

The poems I love startle and disturb me. Good art should disrupt us, make us pay attention, make us do a little work. In his TED Talk, "The Clues to a Great Story," the filmmaker Andrew Stanton says that an audience wants 2 + 2, not 4. In other words, the audience wants to be engaged. Think of the shows and films we watch–there's always an obstacle, some drama, a crisis. In fiction, we're familiar with Freytag's Pyramid: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. You'll recall from the introductory paradigm of poetry and fiction in this text that poetry doesn't have the same elements of fiction such as plot and setting, but all art contains struggle. In poetry, I've heard this described as "tension" or "what's at stake" in a poem.

This is not to say that excising all the trauma and drama onto a page creates tension, or even creates a poem. Many young poets mistake trauma for poetry. Any poetry teacher can tell you that they've read a number of poems that revel in trauma, depression, and darkness with zero tension. Tension doesn't come from these places. Somewhat sardonically, but accurately, the poet William Matthews (1942-1997) offer this ur-subject index for lyric poetry in a 1984 Bread Loaf lecture, "Dull Subjects:"

1) I went out into the woods today and it made me feel, you know, sort of religious.
2) We're not getting any younger.

3) It sure is cold and lonely (a) without you, honey, or (b) with you, honey.
4) Sadness seems but the other side of the coin of happiness, and vice-versa, and in any case the coin is too soon spent and on we know not what.

Basically, every subject has been explored in poetry. There are no new subjects, only new treatments of those subjects. The new treatment on these old subjects comes from tension, experimentation, and innovation of language and image. The Brownings are a perfect example of this. In their lifetime, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861) was a phenom in the 19th century English poetry scene, whereas her poet-husband, Roberbt Browning (1812–1889) experienced obscurity in her shadow. However, his work is standing the test of time compared to his wife's more traditional and schooled verse. He's regarded as one of the most important poets of the Victorian era with creepy dramatic monologues and psychological angles that add tension and attention to his verse.

So how do you create this tension? Take a risk, write something strange. Don't start with an idea, such as, *I am going to write a love poem*. Starting with an idea is writing an idea-driven poem. Instead, start with language, so you start with a language-driven poem. You can even have a vague idea what you want to write about–love, but start with words: *daffodils*, *urgency*, *weak spring sun*, and let these words guide your poem. Don't write idea-driven poems. Write language-driven poems. American fiction writer, George Saudnders, says that your stories are terrible places for your ideas, meaning, writing is an act of discovery.

In his book, *On Form*, Robert Hass recalls a panel he was on with Seamus Heaney who remarked, "that a poem for him almost always began in dissent, by saying no." Hass expands this idea with, "Thought begins in disagreement, the terms of which demand to be articulated." A poem is a kind of thinking-through an experience, idea, feeling, situation–imagined or real. To see a poem that works with this kind of negation, read Marvin Bell's (1937–2020) love poem, "To Dorothy." Look at how the first two lines contradict each other, "You are not beautiful, exactly. / You are beautiful, inexactly." The pattern of negation from line to line repeats with the poem, just as the two stanzas that make up the entire poem offer contradiction. There is surprise in dissent and contradiction, and thus, tension.

Imitation

The old adage, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery is sage advice for a young poet. I remember reading Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room," and becoming transfixed and transported, just as the young Elizabeth was in the dentist's waiting room as she heard her auntie bellow out in pain. I became a devotee of Bishop's work and wrote many bad sestinas. The point is, find poets whose work inspires you, and copy their line breaks, syntax, diction, patterns of thought and imagery. We learn through doing, and imitating a poet whose work you admire helps you define your own voice. Don't worry, this isn't plagiarism. It's learning how to think and move in poetry. Quickly enough, you'll find that you will move on from the object of

inspiration and add others, but some of their touchstone traits will remain in you, and they will evolve with your voice.

Maria Nazos is a poet we've published in the NAR, and recently her poem, "Afraid," was a finalist for the James Hearst Poetry Contest. Below is her poem, and what follows is a short craft essay she wrote for this book that explains the poem's origin of inspiration, and lastly, she shares an early draft of the poem with typos and all. Spend some time looking at the differences between the final draft below and her early version which appears after her craft essay.

Afraid by Maria Nazos

We were afraid of everything: tornadoes, love, skateboards,
Shelly Cooper and the brass-knuckled earrings she wore.
We were petrified of the human papillomavirus, how
it was Latin for butterfly. We were afraid of butterflies,
their migration. Pot smoke when blown into our mouths

by a boy. We were afraid of Mike Rex, the older man who spat
rap and lived in a mobile home and had long, dark curly
hair, a sweaty forehead, and sold whole sheets of LSD.
We were afraid of being tied to fences, being handcuffed
together, of parties, red-and-blue-lights. Afraid

of the Wisconsin border where people crossed to drink.
Afraid of drinking, cigarette butts imprinted with lipstick stains.
We were especially afraid of the older girls who had babies
and boyfriends, whose clothes, it was rumored, they'd sliced
to ribbons. When they laughed you could see their fillings.

When they lifted their arms to chug a beer-bong, we saw
their spiny tattoos. We were afraid of tattoos, parties
in cornfields, tiny white pills, the dead and the living. Shards
of glass, mirrors, and the fallen salt we tossed over our left
shoulder where our grandmothers told us the devil lurked,

waiting to enter our bodies. Bodies were frightening:
Couldn't banish the memory of the man who emerged
from Hamell Woods, stark nude for us to see. The way
he held himself in unashamed offering. The world
opened and offered itself, and that was terrifying, too.

There were so many things we didn't see but believed.
Black ice, slick sidewalks, falling in love, or just falling and being
laughed at. Being the center of attention, eye contact, suburbs
named after cut-down trees: Timber Estates, Maple Falls—
We were afraid of leaving them. Becoming lost and adult.

Nail salons cropping up like corn. Nipple-hair, Dutch Elm

disease, and yellow tape circling a tree. The smell of cow
manure when you drove out too far. Pigeons and how they'd stare
with inbred-red eyes. Afraid of standing, alone, in the middle
of America's heart: its beat that called us to a place that burned.

My Creative Process Behind "Afraid" by Maria Nazos

I'd be remiss if I didn't begin by thanking Dorianne Laux; much of my work results from studying hers over the past few decades.

The reason behind "Afraid" was that I was trying to write about a Midwest upbringing without being too branded. I used Laux's "Fear" poem from her collection entitled *Smoke* as a jumping-off point.

What I love most about Laux's poem and her work is her unrelentingly crisp, monstrously specific details. All too often, when we write about certain psychic and physical terrains ("we" as in "I"), we default to reincarnated clichés.

I wanted to dive deeper and provide concrete imagery from my life that spanned beyond the exterior landscape and into the speaker's interior condition. I sought a poem that moved past an itemization of the outside world but took the reader through patterns that break and make repetitive and cognitive leaps into and out of the narrator's coming of Age.

One of my favorite processes for limbering up my creative muscles includes the imitation poem—ask my students. I believe in teaching exercises that I actively implement throughout my life. When I say I teach "imitation poems," my students ask, "What do you mean by 'imitate' a poem? What parts do I imitate and how?" My answer is everything!

When imitating another author's poem, I like to begin by literally "connecting the dots" by emulating the original poet's syntactical, imagistic, and rhetorical strategies. However, many other ways exist to imitate another writer's poems, whether through word choice, form, or syntax. I was striving for all of the above while drafting "Afraid," but mainly focusing on borrowing from Laux's repetition, lexical choices, and imagery. After all, the universal is in the personal, and we tend to forget that.

Early-career writers opt for vague language and nonspecific imagery because those facets "are more relatable" to readers. My counter-question to those students is this—Which sentence is more relatable? Phrase A, "I want to do something cool with my life," or Phrase B, "I want to sip cheap Cabernet out of a chipped mug while sitting on the floor of a Parisian youth hostel shards of moon glitter into the last moments of the night" But I digress.

Laux's success stems from the way components of craft create and manipulate pacing—through repetition, imagery, and syntax. It's also worth mentioning that pacing, according to Stephen Dobyns's; essay "Pacing: The Ways a Poem Moves" in his craft collection *Best Words, Best Order: Essays on Poetry*, entails the reader playing what they do know against what they don't know. In a list/repetition poem, you must find ways to provide specific expectations for the reader, break them, and intentionally return or veer away.

Returning to my writing process, I noticed how imagery, repetition, and syntax moved in Laux's verse and tried to do the same with mine. The whole time, as I was writing by hand (I write all my drafts by hand), I kept asking myself, what's the purpose of this line here? What's the pacing doing? Where's my reader now?

For me, when a poem rises and swells with repetition, the images, syntax, and pacing must gracefully swerve along with those aspects. The volume must rise, fall, and build; the tempo must speed up, slow down, and skip a beat. And all the different craft components must work in symphony with those goals.

With a repetitive list poem, you've got to throw the reader's ear off, then bring it back. You can accomplish this feat by dropping in off-rhymes or aural surprises. You can suddenly stop the repetition and then return to it. You can go from a lengthier syntax to a more staccato one.

Meanwhile, my editing kept the reader moving forward throughout the repetition. Any time you employ a chant, it can overwhelm or space out your audience. Have you noticed the trance-inducing effect of the ocean's waves or the mellowing of the drum's beat? That disembodied yet soothing feeling occurs due to a physiological reaction; your brain registers repetition as oddly calming.

Therefore, for a poem with many repetitions to work, you must be strategic in modulating the momentum. You want the piece to be something other than a sonic wash or a drab staccato. You must manipulate all the elements of surprise to keep pulling your reader along with you.

If you check out my draft, you'll notice that many of my revisions are plug-and-play. I was tinkering with images to ensure they provided that push-and-pull in speeding up and slowing down the reader. I also wanted to be intentional about where the imagistic pile-up crescendoed and where it needed to ebb. Reading drafts of the poem aloud helped me edit, add, tweak, and subtract to figure out the perfect timing and pacing.

An early draft of "Afraid" by Maria Nazos

We were afraid of everything: tornadoes, love, skateboards,

Alyssa Gromek and the brass knuckle-earrings she wore,
We were petrified of the human papilloma virus, of the way
it was Latin for butterfly; we were afraid of butterflies,
of migration, of being called a lesbian, of being a lesbian,

of elastic bra straps, pot smoke when it was blown into
our mouths by a boy. We were afraid of Mike Rex, the older
man who spat his own rap verses and lived in a mobile home,
and had long dark curly hair, a sweaty forehead, and a whole

paper of LSD. We were afraid of being tied to fences, of being
handcuffed together, of parties, of red-and-blue-lights. We
were afraid of the Wisconsin border, where people went
to drink, afraid of drinking, of cigarette butts imprinted
with lipstick stains. We were especially afraid of the older

girls, who already had babies and boyfriends whose clothes,
it was rumored they'd cut to ribbons, and when they laughed
you could see their fillings, and when they lifted their arms
to chug a beer-bong, you could see their spiny urchin tattoos,
we were afraid of tattoos, of parties in cornfields, of tiny
white pills. We were afraid of the dead, the living, broken

shards of glass, broken mirrors, fallen salt, of the man who
was said to emerge from Hammel woods completely naked,
of the way rocks protruded from the ground, of black ice
and slick sidewalks, and falling. We were afraid of falling
and being laughed at, of falling in love, of the suburbs
named after cut-down trees: Timber Estates, Maple Falls,
Willow Brooks. We were afraid of leaving, of becoming

Lost and adult, of cities, divorces, losing touch in the way
That adults seemed to lose touch, we were afraid of being
stupid, a loser, too loud, too smart. We were afraid of being
called out for being fake, we were afraid of being real, and
afraid of what would happen if we were: we were afraid
of being wild, of not being wild enough, of our youth

never finishing or going on forever, of pimples that erupted
beneath our chin, our father's pornos left on the computer
screen of a large-breasted woman opening her shirt,
of the way she thrust her head back in abandon. We were
terrified of being abandoned, of abandoned houses,

of R-rated movies and the way a woman swept her tongue
down her lover's belly. We were afraid of pierced eyebrows
and tongues and speaking in tongues, the churches with
the purple velvet curtains and harsh lights and people who

collapses on the floor, drunk with the holy spirit. We were
afraid of the Holy Spirit, afraid of darker ones too, because
one of the boys said, on a bad acid trip, he saw his soul run
across Black Road and never return. We were afraid of Ouija
boards, of summoning up souls, flickering candles, being picked
last for soccer, of pierced tongues and eyebrows, of the father

we'd heard ripped them out of his son's face. We were afraid
of the boys who got into a fight because one slept with
the other's girl, we were afraid of ataxia, a word we'd only
just learned, of the mother who slowly became wheelchair
bound as her daughter helplessly watched. We were afraid
of mothers, we were afraid of becoming our mothers, of the way

they sat with us, smoking at the kitchen table, telling us
about their men, their medication, their past of paisely
and lost babies, or drinking Tab and having black roots
and empty eyes, and then fell down the stairs drunk, and
could never drive again, and called their daughters The Little
One and the Big One, until they gradually began to speak
And learn to eat on their own again. We were even more

afraid when that mother recovered, and along with it,
stopped smoking, stopped drinking, stopped her medication,
we were afraid of change, afraid of recovery, of raw chicken
and salmonella, and fish eyes and the father's footsteps
into a stepsister's room, we were afraid of long silences
at night, of the girl who gave birth to another baby, of
the boy who loved other boys and wore black lipstick
and had cuts on his arms. We were afraid of dusty old

Christmas ornaments, port-a-potties, of military drafts,
of guitars with broken strings, old mattresses piled
on the sidewalk, fish eyes, and cunnilingus and fellatio,
and being mocked for being too big, too smelly, too
tight, too loose. We were afraid of broken toilets and
cats dragging their broken tails across the road and
HIV and peach trees that never grew and flooding,

especially when someone's brother caught a carp
in the street. It was what fascinated us and did not
understand that drew us in most: tinted windows,
pot holes, graffiti on the silo, the emergency exit

behind the bar, leg stubble, the cigarette becoming
one cylindrical ash in a passed-out mother's mouth,
the smell of propane, the stink of burned rubber,
squealing tires, foreclosed houses with dirty stuffed
animals littering the floors, condom wrappers, and early
mornings of quiet. We were afraid of glassy-eyed dolls,

of getting older, of staying young, of the invisible
people we could become, moving to cities, getting
divorces, of the metal detectors at school, of in-school
suspensions, of the way that building was entirely
mirrored, an old ballet studio, so you could not look
away from your face. We were afraid of spiny thistles

that caught on socks, of being fingered, of the silence
between songs at parties, of the land which seemed
to never end, of the liquor stores and tanning beds
and nail salons that kept cropping up around us,

of nipple-hair, Dutch Elm disease and yellow tape around
the tree, the smell of cow manure when you drove
out too far, of the pigeons and the way they would
land and stare with strange red-eyes, of standing in the center
of the continent, right in the middle of America's heart,
certain that we could hear a beat, and that, as it grew
fainter, it would call us away, to where we could not name
or see.

Ekphrastic Impulse

Just as no art is written in a vacuum, no art exists without other art. As a species we make visual, aural, physical, and written art, and that influences other artists. The word "ekphrastic" is Greek for "description." An ekphrastic poem is a poem that describes another work of art. A notable example is John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Imagine Keats, dying of tuberculosis in his early 20s, turning a Greek urn from scene to scene, writing about a future that would never arrive for him, but finding solace in the funeral object! No wonder this poem yields some of the most famous lines in English poetry: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Another well-known ekphrastic poem is Rainer Maria Rilke's

"The Archaic Torso of Apollo," and talk about another attention-getting ending: "You must change your life."

Once you know what an ekphrastic poem is, you'll start to see that they are everywhere. I like to think of them as art's fascia, or connective tissue, a kind of rosetta stone between mediums. Writing an ekphrastic poem is one of those sui generis prompts, much like the list poem from the first chapter, that yields generous results. Art, afterall, is a conversation. Ekphrastic poems come from many sources, not just visual art, but music, installations, performance art, sculpture, plays, songs, lyrics, other written works, concerts, etc.

There are a number of ways to signal that your poem is an ekphrastic piece. As in Rilke's poem, the allusion is in the title. Often an epigraph can provide context, as in the poem "Black Boy," by Jordan Franklin, who won the 2017 James Hearst Poetry Prize and appears below. Another poem we published in the NAR follows, "But Beautiful" by George Kalamaras, and the indication that it's an ekphrastic piece occurs in the dedication.

Black Boy by Jordan Franklin

After "Glen" by Jean Michael Basquiat, 1985

The choleric shakes
of his reprimand careen
from thought to larynx. His
love is mayhem; it sparks the
ritual burning of branched
fingers once plump with olives.
When the whistling stops, the
tree must relearn its true weight
and dislodge his tired,
dark fruit. Fire is his
sacrament, its home the stoked
back of his throat. His crown
of barbed wire forms a brooch
across his neck–His fruit,
not even the started birds
will eat.

But Beautiful by George Kalamaras

for Freddie Hubbard

Finally, the day comes to an end.

Our work comes to an end.
Wind in the pines. Winter wind.
Nine or ten deer bedded down
in the snowy cheatgrass outside
my mountain door. Cold, blowy snow
in their matted fur. Tu Fu's "Night Traveling"
on my mind: Thin grass bends on the breezy shore
And the tall mast seems lonely in the boat.
I open the night, my own long hours of night traveling,
with Freddie's first LP, Open Seasame, June 19, 1960.
Freddie, only twenty-two. That photo of him on the back
cover hunching all of his youth over the keys with McCoy,
going over a score. The sad of his "But Beautiful"
blowing my mind–not in the clichéd way, but sailing
me further than the day and my aching brain, taking me
to Tu Fu, his exile and loneliness, to my youth,
a wooded cottage several states away. Moon-drenched
swamps. Hickory trees. Hound dogs. Even hours
south of there to Indianapolis where Freddie first hit
those notes, finding a way to stay in the world.
I think of Tina Brooks, Sam Jones, and Cliffard Jarvis.
McCoy, of course. All coming together
for this. How can so many early years express the ancient
depth of what is to come, as if–yes–we all return
into a body, a knowing past pressing us forward? When I walk
to the door, the deer outside just a few yards away huff a little
and shift, their breath streaming the already-smoky
night. A fawn lifting its delicate face
to its mother, nudging her, pleading for something
I'm not even sure it understands what it needs. Now a young buck sniffs
the hindquarters of a doe. Instinctively. The urge for us all
to move forward. Enter the unknown. Explore
the glorious darkness. Merge with another
body and create a world. Freddie's "Gypsy Blue"
now come on, reminding me that my home in the woods
is 1183 miles away. In years. In decades of aches
and rain. In boggy memories and all the relative dead.
In my mother's voice, which–even now–I still struggle
to recall. Tu Fu's years of wandering and exile
were the only thing that brought him
home. How does one decide to explore the heavens
and hold the Milky Way, like medicine,
below the tongue? To float
the river, its wind-bent reeds, and hold

these melancholy notes inside
as a way to thrive? Oh, Freedie. Whether
in Gongyi, Henan Province, or Indianapolis,
like you, we are all born, and we all
must one day leave the body and set sail
with Tu Fu down the Milo into a glorious river silk.
Your Open Sesame reminds me to open
even to that. Even if the notes know a world
my knowing does not. You are blowing
your trumpet and blowing a boat into what
we spend our lives wondering about most. Even as we try
to forget. Each breath of yours huffing us forward,
back, through the rocking moon-bit wave. Time
and again. You are gone now, Freddie.
Blown away in the blowing
of your horn. In tonights' blowing
snow. Out there yet still
here. Yes, you are gone, Freddie. Gone.
And it is sad. All of it
sad. But beautiful. But beautiful.

Exercise 1: Ekphrastic Practice

Pick a piece of art, perhaps there's one you already have in mind, because it's evocative for you. Of course, there is visual art, also music, and other written works. If you're open to inspiration, see what the National Gallery of Art is featuring. Pick a piece and spend time observing it with Beginner's Mind. What do you notice? What do you associate with it? How do you want to signify the ekphrastic connection: title, epigraph, dedication, a description of the piece within the poem?

Exercise 2: Imitate a Poem

Pick a poem you admire, just like Maria Nazos did for her poem "Afraid" after Dorianne Laux's "Fear." Imitate the poem in syntax, image, line length, and diction. Don't try to control the process or force your voice in. You are a medium, channeling in another voice that allows you to take risks.

Exercise 3: Risks

Below are a few prompts that put risk, experiment, and fun first. Give yourself permission to play, and make sure the critic is taking a nap when you write. Remember, a writing exercise is like trying on a pair of jeans–only you have to see the first try. Next, you can leave them on the floor, return them to the rack, or purchase. It is all a try-on.

- When Sandra Cisneros visited the University of Northern Iowa in 2019, an audience member asked her for writing advice, and she quickly volleyed back, " Write a poem you'd be embarrassed for your mother to read." So write a poem you'd be embarrassed for your mother to read.
- The title of the poem is a word you've now learned. The OED is a great place to start for inspiration. The body of this poem is now your response/definition/use of the word, but 75% of what's in the poem can't be true.

CHAPTER FIVE

Endings and Beginnings

"Who are the ancestors of your poetry and now are their descendents?" - Joy Harjo

Very rarely does a poem arrive perfectly packaged from beginning to end, hand-delivered by the muse. We read a poem from title to last line, but rarely is it written in this order. I've heard poets describe pulling up poems drafted years earlier, and in the revision, only a couple lines or images from the original remain. Some poems are published in a literary magazine with one title, but appear in a full-length collection under a different title. Often, a chunk of lines or stanzas need to be cut away from the start of the poem. I call this "throat-clearing" revision, just like a person might clear their throat before speaking into a microphone, it can take a bit of writing before the poem finds its true subject. In her memoir, *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*, poet and memorist Maggie Smith breaks the fourth wall, discussing how to end a memoir in the midst of continuing life events, and turns to poetry for advice. She recalls what Stanley Plumly said about poems, "They begin in the middle and the end in the middle, only later." This is equally true of the writing process.

First, think about how you approach a poem you're about to read. What on the page do you take in? What do you disregard? An irony about titles is that we often scan them and don't let the information inform the rest of what we read.

Titles

Read a poem's title and let it sit with you, because even though titles can be such a small thing, their weight is informative. Below are some titles from the NAR's summer/fall 2020 issue. Read each title and pause. After reading the title, what do you expect the poem to be like? How did the title set up your expectations for the poem?

"Elegy Walking Through the Woods" by Richard Jackson
"Short Hike in the Chon-Kemin Valley" by Raphael Dagold
"Idiom" by Rebecca Foust
"Self-Portrait as Scientific Observation" by Hayan Charara
"Aubade as Prey" by Alex Mouw
[Ron gone, released] by Ted Jean
"Ode to Running" by Adam Scheffler
"The Reunion" by Alice Friman
"Leaving the Funeral of My Ex-Lover's Mother" by Jamin Warburton

Some titles, the like Warburon's and Dagold's poems, "Leaving the Funeral of My Ex-Lover's Mother" and "Short Hike in the Chon-Kemin Valley," are evocative and create a fictionesque-

exposition, so much so, you might expect yourself to be dropped into a scene or meet a character. Titles like this set up more of an expectation or guide for how to read the poem. As the reader encounters the first line they have both more information and expectations than when a poem is more broadly titled like “Idiom" or “The Reunion.” When the reader has information and expectations, then the poet has choices. Do they fulfill these or subvert them and swing the poem in a wild, new direction? When a poem is more broadly titled, there are equal options. Will Foust open her poem “Idiom" with an idiomatic expression, a metaphor, image or something else? Some titles give a lot of information, such as the poem below we published in the NAR. From the title, we can deduce it’s a love poem, and the phrase, “love song” references T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” We know where the speaker considers their home, Peterborough, and where they are traveling, on Route 140. Compared to the poem, the title contains much information. I’ve heard titles like this described as interstate onramps to a poem, because they offer so much direction and information about the poem.

Love Song for John on Route 140, Coming Home from Peterborough by Tom Daley

Wrinkling home on Route 140,
I think of the frank loveliness
of the day, the air clean

& clear, the sky scraped
down to its blue lubricities,
each cloud seldom & singular,

adrift as a paroled convict.
I take your hand in mine
with the wistfulness

of an old fever, & think
how fortunate I am
to be kept so coolly

& lovingly in the bounds
of your heart. Love songs
have taken precedence

over prayers in the great
welter of the popular
imagination

so I offer you this one
without melody or refrain,
one that steers straight

& even as it sustains.

Other poems will tell you about their form and occasion right there in the title, like “Aubade as Prey.” An Aubade is a short poem, usually spoken lover to lover at the break of day. Other titles will signal other types of poems and even forms, such as elegy, ode, lament, or sonnet. It’s worth noting that some poets chose to not title their poems. Shakespeare’s sonnet and Emily Dickinson had their work ordered and numbered posthumously, based on the best available chronological information. Other times a poet might choose to not title their work and the first line of the poem stands in for the title, but the first line is set apart in the title space with bracket’s like Ted Jean’s poem [Ron gone, released]. Read the entire poem below. What do you notice about it? Why do you think the poet chose to not title this piece?

[Ron gone, released] by Ted Jean

Rone gone, released
in some presumably
state sanctioned sooty furnace
to hydrogen, discredited carbon
and feathery blonde ash
in an unsealed gray shoe box

in the passenger seat
on the silent drive home

on the mantle over a
wine fueled fire with friends

on the desk by my elbow
at the midnight window

as sleet through street light
appears to rise in flames

Of course, all titles are important, but I posit that poem titles can do more signaling about the content to come than other genres. In poetry, a title can signify a form such as “Sestina” by Elizabeth Bishop or “Sonnet with a Different Letter at the End of Every Line” by George Starbuck” or “Abecedarian Requiring Further Examination of Anglikan Seraphym Subjugation of a Wild Indian Reservation” by Natalie Diaz. Titles can also indicate types of lyric poems that follow a specific manner or style: ode, lament, aubade, elegy, pastoral. Examples are: “Ode on a Grecian Urn” by John Keats or “Ninth Elegy” by Ranier Maria Rilke.

Like in other forms of art, poets might use a style of painting or music, and words such as “self-portrait, “still life, “triptych,” “song,” “hymn,” and even “poem” as part of the title. A preposition can start some titles, such as Marvin Bell’s “To Dorothy. Prepositions such as “to,” “for” or “on,” might serve as a dedication or occasion, as in Ben Johnson’s (1572–1637) short poem, “On my First Son.” Then, there are certain types of poems that signify a convention, like a poem written for a wedding, or a spring poem, written on the occasion of spring emerging, noting that below all that greening, new life, spring is really a messy, muddy business as William Carlow William shows in “Spring and All.” Ars Poetica is Latin for “the art of poetry,” and these poems offer meta-commentary on the art or act of writing a poetry

Poets create similar titles for poems in a series, like John Berryman’s Dream Songs, titled “Dream Song 1” “Dream Song 2,” and so on. The contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield has a series of poems titled after the scientific process of assays: Interruption: “Possibility: An Assay,” “To Spareness: An Assay,” “To Opinion: An Assay,” to name a few.

Sometimes, writing a poem is easier than coming up with its title. If you find yourself struggling to title a poem you’ve written, try this trick described by Marvin Bell: go three lines up from the end of the poem and five words in. Here, you’ll likely find a word, a few words, or a phrase for your title. Maybe you’ll find your literal title right there: three perfect words in a row, or an approximate title, or the title’s inspiration. This trick really works, because as Bell explained, at this point the poem is circling its [rhetorical heart] (my phrasing).

Epigraphs

An epigraph is a short quotation at the beginning of a book, chapter, or poem. If occurring at the beginning of a book or chapter (as in this text), the epigraph can serve as a kind of dedication or stage setting for the subject, and if it occurs at the beginning of a poem, it can serve the same aforementioned purpose, but also provide historical context for the poem, like “The Invention of Ether,” a poem below by Katy Aisenberg that won the Hearst Poetry Prize. Epigraphs can help gloss and provide context for a reference the reader might not garner from the poem itself.

Pause after the title and epigraph. After you read each, what can you deduce from the title? What about the epigraph? What more do you expect to follow? How would the poem be different if the epigraph weren’t there?

The Invention of Ether by Katy Aisenberg

> *October 1846, Boston MA.*

In the red brick city, under the blue glass dome
Twelve doctors removed a tumor from the woman's jaw.
The only sound was their occasional organized chatter

And her easy breathing.
The day they first used ether no one knew
How much we would have to forget.
All over America citizens opened their mail
Ripping their triumphantly new American stamps.
They had no thought that their civil country would suddenly split in two
Like a woman laboring to bring forth an unwieldy child.
They walked to the bank with gold firm in their hands.
Buildings stayed balanced with no peculiar thought
To the slightest sweetness in the air, the small hiss of gas
As souls escaped into the atmosphere.
The world was a white and sunny ward.
There is so much to remember to forget,
She murmured before sucking deeply from the glass tube
And counting to three under the blue Bullfinch dome.
Dr Morton controlled her breathing, Dr Warren proclaimed
She feels no pain.

Endings

When a poem really lands its ending, you can feel it. You might see the ending coming, but more likely probably not, and the poem takes off in a new direction. Some poems referenced in this text that have killer endings are Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," and James Wright, "A Blessing." They are all sharp, unexpected, and perfect.

Just as first lines can be difficult in some poems, endings can be as well. As an editor, I read thousands and thousands of poems a year. Some poems I read continue on well past where they should have ended, which often occurs when a poet doesn't trust that they've said what they wanted to when they said it in stanza two and stanza seven. An image might repeat or a new metaphor might introduce a concept that was perfectly illustrated with a previous metaphor. Some poems meander, and never find their finale. Even though a volta is used in discussions of sonnets, it's a helpful idea for ending all poems. In Italian, "volta" means "turn," referring to the turn of argument or thought between the octet and sestet in a Petracharn sonnet of between the first three quatrains and the heroic couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet. A great example is "Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" where the speaker spends the first three quatrains weighing his girlfriend's appearance and way of being against the beauty standards of the time and finds her wanting, but says he loves her anyway and she's beyond compare in the last two lines.

In tanka, a Japanese poem of thirty one syllables, usually written like 5/7/5/7/7 there is also a turn that occurs around the third line, dividing the poem roughly in half. The first two or three lines are called the "kami-no-ku" or upper poem and the last two lines are the "shimo-no-ku" or lower poem.

The sonnet and tanka examples are not a formula for all poems, but a reminder to the writer that there needs to be a change, a shift in the wind, a perception that is earned and delightful. Some poetry teachers have advised students to always end on an action, the thinking being that verbs and actions connote energy are therefore inherently dynamic. Others have advised to end on an image, which can offer the opportunity for powerful and evocative figurative language. Personally, I have found that there's no "one size fits all" way to end a poem. You will need to find your way out of each poem you write.

Below are two poems that first appeared in the NAR. The first poem, "Geneva Avenue" by Kristen Abel is an aching recollection of abandonment and for fear of spoiler alerts, I won't say too much about the second poem, "Self-Portrait with Curses at 35,000 Feet" by Hayan Charara, except to note that all of Charara's work we've published in the NAR end with a smack to the head you didn't see coming. These two poems end so differently–one with a bang and one with a whimper, and yet both are about loss, They end wildly differently, and had to come to their own reckoning.

Geneva Avenue by Kristen Abel

The front door was always open. The dog always slept half in, half out.
Afternoons, I'd watch the neighbor girl smoke her father's cigarettes

Out on the front porch. He's cool with it, she'd say. He's cool with
Pretty much anything. I'd turn down a drag. I'd use my shoe to nudge

A lemon dropped from a nearby tree. Nights, I was in charge.
I'd make my brothers bologna sandwiches, one with syrup and two without.

Sometimes we'd sit on the side steps and listen to the summer rains.
One night, the neighbor girl's father threw a party.

I could see my father's face from the kitchen window, bright with beer
And torchlight and the telling of some wild story. I was washing dishes.

My brothers were in the other room watching *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*.
I slotted a plate into the drying rack. I looked across the yard

littered with skateboards and lemon trees. It was a clear night. I was thirteen
and alone. That's all. Nothing bad happened. When people ask me

Why I don't visit anymore or call, why I can't forgive, I say
There's nothing to say. There's nothing to forgive. I finished the dishes

and went into the other room. I wasn't hungry and I'd already seen
the movie anyways, twice, so instead I watched my brothers eat.

Self-Portrait with Curses at 35,000 Feet by Hayan Charara

On a flight to Detroit
the guy next to me
told me about his shitty job,
his dumb,
slobbering dog,
his good-for-nothing
kids, two of them–
assholes–and his lying,
cheating wife.
Moving
at 500 mph
above the earth without
feeling it,
I listened to him go on
and on, his pain
bad to worse–

to what wisdom
does suffering
give birth?
–and must we always
learn from it?
Earlier
that morning,
my mother had died,
and going back to her,
once
and for all,
I would find out.
But first
I had to suffer
Bob–
fucking Bob.

Exercise 1: Begin with the End

Use the last line of a poem you've written that is still in the revision stage, or borrow the last line of a poem from this chapter (listed below for your convenience) and make it the first line of your poem for this exercise. You can make small alterations like adding articles, prepositions, etc.

- appears to rise in flames
- more being than I can hold springs up in my heart
- she feels no pain
- fucking Bob
- the movie anyways, twice, so instead I watched my brothers eat.
- as what he loves may never like too much.
- grip down and begin to awaken
- as any she belied with false compare
- Zion or Oklahoma, or some other hell they've mapped out for us

Exercise 2: Pick a Title Style

A number of ways to title a poem were discussed in this chapter. You can use any one of these (use a form, preposition, or write a poem using a lyrical convention like an abode or elegy).

Exercise 3: Use the News

Write a poem like Frank O'Hara's (1926–1966) "The Day Lady Died," which is a kind of elegy for Billie Holiday. O'Hara's poem ripple with life, even in the midst of elegy, a poem of reflection, particularly to grieve the dead or what's lost. Use the structure of O'Hara's poem to write your own, which you can base off a current or historical news headline. You'll notice that O'Hara's poem uses:

- an event that makes national news or on the day you lost something important to you
- time or chronological events as the speaker goes throughout his day
- includes copy or text from what the speaker reads
- there is a personal "I" that moves to a collective "we" by the end of the poem

CHAPTER SIX

Figurative Language

"Metaphors want to live." - Kay Ryan

A poet is not a court reporter. What is in a transcript is fact, perception of fact, or deception. What's left out of a transcript is doubt, associations, and musings, what's imagined. As a species, we've long preferred musings or stories and songs over fact, manuals and receipts. When gathered around a fire, we tell stories and sing songs, we don't read ledgers. We are a story telling species.

A poet is not a court reporter. In a deposition, the only risk is not telling the truth as experienced. In a poem, the only risk is telling the truth as is.

As we live, we encounter hard knocks and legitimate big feelings about those hard and important things, yet we are not all poets. Why?

Sometimes a metaphor is a more real experience than the testimony. Why?

Recall Perine's classic definition of poetry, "a kind of language that says more and says it more intensely than does ordinary language." If the one tool we have to do this is language, how can we say things more intensely than ordinary language? Poetry's main vehicle for this is figurative language, which is where the playfulness, risk, and vulnerability of poetry goes beyond ordinary language.

There are many more comprehensive resources on figurative language than what we will cover here, where we are introducing these concepts. Poets.org is, according to their website: "produced by the Academy of American Poets, a nonprofit charitable organization.The site was launched in 1996, becoming the first online resource for poems, poets' biographies, essays about poetry, and materials for K-12 teachers." You can read more about Poets.org and the Academy of American Poets (founded in 1934 by twenty-three year old Marie Bullock) at their website. They have a comprehensive list of poetic terms, forms, techniques, literary schools and movements, and figurative devices. What's great about this free online resource is that they link to longer pages including examples and detailed definitions, including many of the figurative devices beyond the purview of this text, so take a look: Poets.org's Glossary of Poetic Terms.

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are expressions that use words to achieve effects beyond the power of ordinary language. We've already discussed metaphor, simile, and anaphora. Personification is

a great device that gives human qualities to something that is not human. For example, in Landi's poem "Before the Divorce, Bed Bugs," the bedframe is described as an "empty ribcage of slats." Like Prometheus shaping men from mud, personification brings a human consciousness to the image.

There are many, many more, figurative devices and there is a glossary of poetic terms from poet's.org. The glossary is inclusive of all terms, so you'll need to know what you're looking for. Here are some terms to read in this glossary:

- metonymy
- synecdoche
- hyperbole
- understatement
- apostrophe
- allusion
- metaphor
- simile

The kryptonite to good figures of speech is abstraction and generalization. Abstraction is expressing a thought without a concrete image; for example, *I was in the shadows of myself*. A generalization is a broad, sweeping statement, also often without a concrete connection: *We are all lonely in love*. New poets often mistake abstraction and generalization as powerful because they make bold statements, and therefore feel powerful or impactful. Yet, the opposite is true. Abstraction and generalization might be true, but the language is not anchored to anything specifically meaningful or specific to a speaker. A way to make both abstraction and generalization particular is to use concrete nouns. I tell my students if you can touch it, it's concrete, if you can't, it's not.

Examples of intangible nouns: love, grief, feelings, darkness, loneliness, fear, hope.
Examples of tangible or concrete nouns: chair, forehead, petunia, velvet, bowl, pen.

When you can express an abstraction or generalization with something concrete, this is when figurative language is at its best. Go through any poem in this text and mentally separate the nouns into either a concrete bucket or intangible bucket. Take note of the ratios you're seeing. Now, when it comes to the subject of poetry, there are way more poems about abstract concepts like love and death than about concrete things such as bowls and petunias. The way to write about an abstract subject is with concrete imagery. Check out Exercise 3 for the details.

Metaphor

If I were limited to only one literary device to work with, it would be metaphor. To my thinking, a metaphor is essential to poetry because it makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange again. "Meta" in Greek means "beyond" or "carry over or after." And for discussion's sake, we'll throw in Aristotle's definition of metaphor, "metaphor consists of giving the thing a name that

belongs to something else." We know that a metaphor compares two unlike things without using "like" or "as," but beyond this definition, the impact of a metaphor is its powerhouse.

A metaphor is a kind of transportation. We teach and learn by metaphor. When teaching a child to swim, they are instructed to doggy paddle, or move their arms as though a dog does in water, and this description makes the strange familiar. The strange and familiar swap also happens in poetry. As a parent, the worst thing I can imagine is losing a child, and thankfully I have not gone through this, but Ben Jonson has, and his poem "On My First Son" gives us who have not experienced this kind of loss, a taste of this poisonous parental grief through the metaphors in his poem. Standing over the child's grave, the speaker says, "Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."

Contrary to assumptions about many figurative devices, these devices do not attempt to be untrue or obscure meaning. In fact, a metaphor, along with other devices like simile and personification, attempt to create an exactness in experience or feeling, a truthfulness. Metaphors are after precision of meaning. Many new writers think that obfuscation is power, but the opposite is true–visibility and vulnerability are power. Choose the figurative device that reveals, not the ones that conceal. Confusion is bad, but strangeness is good. Think about the plot to a movie or book that confuses you. Chances are you give up and move on to something else, but if the plot is weird or unexpected, you stay engaged. The same is true with language in a poem. Metaphors and similes, a direct comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as," are a ticket to strange and engaged. Poet Matthew Zapruder says this best in his book *Why Poetry*, "a metaphor starts out as a connection our minds might never have made."

A quick note on clichés, avoid them. Once upon a time a cliché was likely original, but now the expression is common and overused. Examples are: to describe "understanding" as "crystal clear," or the swift passage of time as "time flies." Clichés don't offer that "connection our minds might never have made." Go for the new and strange. If you think you've heard an expression before, you likely have, so don't use it and reach for something more interesting.

An extended metaphor, one that runs throughout the poem, is called a conceit. Basically, many metaphors work toward the same goal in a poem. John Donne's poem "The Flea" is a great example of conceit. The speaker reasons that since a flea has bitten him and the woman he wants to sleep with, their blood is already mingled, so they should have sex: "This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is."

To see where and how metaphors are created in a poem, let's strip the poem of all figurative language. Below is a poem that appeared in the NAR, and the title will indicate much of the poem's occasion.

Before the Divorce, Bed Bugs by Joseph Landi

We were bitten
along the repulsive blue track

of ankles and wrists, on the backs
of our heels, on toes and fingertips,
pierced to the farthest reaches
of our unstable hearts.

Darkness hid
the source of our disgust.
We sighed like trains between
stations, drawing them to us.
Skin spoke in codes of the elements,
a language for the lonely and ravenous.

Now poison's the cure,
and home a nest of carcasses.
At the curb, mattresses
show tufted guts to joggers and stray cats.
A driver prowls cul-de-sacs,
scanning the piles
for remnants of strangers' desires.

In a dim rented room,
he assembles the plunder–
empty ribcage of slats,
paddles headboard of leather.
He tapes shut the slash
that we carved as a warning,
resting his face on a secret hunger.

Now, I'll rewrite the poem, stripping out anything figurative.

Before We Got Divorced, We had Bed Bugs

Bed bugs bit us
on our ankles and wrists,
on heels, on toes and fingertips.
We felt sad in our hearts.

We didn't see these disgusting bugs
because they only come out at night.
They were drawn to our breathing.
They bit our skin and drank our blood.

To get rid of them, we used poison.
We saw their carcasses

and put our mattresses on the curb.
Joggers, stray cats, and a driver
who looks for free stuff
saw them.

He rents a dim room,
and there he assembles
the bed slats and headboard.
He tapes shut the slash
we made so he can
rest on the mattress.

Without figurative devices, particularly the metaphor between bed bugs destroying a mattress and betrayal destroying a marriage, so much is missing from the poem. The language is prosaic, and the excitement and resonance is gone. The beautiful simile, “We sighed like trains between / stations” isn’t there to build the tension with “sighs” or the distance growing between the couple like traveling trains, all the while working the bed bug / destruction metaphor. The paradox between poison and cure, both for the eradication of the bed bugs and the marriage through divorce, is gone. It’s safe to think of most language in poems as doing two or more things at once.

Allusion

An allusion in a poem is a reference to a person, literary work, or event outside the poem. As a poet, you’re assuming that the reader will have context for the reference, so you won’t need to gloss it with an epigraph or overly explain. Allusions to Greek mythology and the Bible are common. For example, in the poem below, readers are likely familiar with Persephone’s fate and the months of winter she must endure when in the underworld with her husband, Hades, who tricked her into the contract.

Persephone as Black Son by Derick Ebert

You wish you could follow me everywhere
don't you? I used to stand in your room, in your shoes
and prance. Some boys will be boys, differently.
Now I have earned the floorboards respect
they won't snitch but slumber when I glide
smoothly on their.backs, like wax I race
from the top step, spilling to the door, then
outside. I carry night on my head like a black hat
mother says, not too late please
I'm her only boy to come home before the dark
buries another sun. If she calls and no response
across valleys and hills, through cities she will storm

to find me full of thunderous laughter. What did you think?
See the ground cackles as well, then you blink and
it's winter.

Anaphora

Anaphora is one of the under-used, excessively powerful figurative devices. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a clause, phrase, sentence or line of poetry. Rhetorically, this is a powerful device, because not only is the same cadence or rhythm used, but so is the same phrasing at the beginning of a line, while the end of the line changes. Below is a great example of anaphora guiding the start of the line with the implication of the poem spirals ever wider. As you read the poem, watch how it proceeds with chronological time, but also blurs the timeline to what ultimately matters. Can you pinpoint the moment the dying mother loses her humanity? How are the similes and metaphors working? Why is she a drive-in theater? A firework? An exhibit? Renaming a person as object removes humanity, and how is anaphora creating that work in this anticipatory elegy? It's safe to think of most language in poems as doing two or more things at once, even if they are the same words repeating themselves.

The Day Her Speech Was Slurred by Cathryn Cofell

An emergency room doctor scheduled a CAT scan
and then an MRI
and then she was admitted
and then she swallowed steroids
and then a patch of scalp was shaved
and then they carved that pumpkin patch
and then they scooped the rotten pulp
and then they stitched the lid back on
and then speech became church
and then green gray confession
and then she unraveled
and then they opened her skull again
and then they siphoned the burning fuel out
and then they stitched again a temporary hem
and then her step was Frakenstein
and then her left eye moved to Hayward
and then they opened her skull again
and then they stopped the riot with a fire hose
and then her brain became Chernobyl
and then her insides out
and then she slept
and then her insides out

and then we lit her up like a drive-in theater
and then she performed a one-act play in four acts
and the she undressed into a red giant
and then talk became Morse code
and then she cradled me like a baby
and then I washed her like fine china
and then I held her like a baby
and then the speak of Quakers
and then rain on her quilted body
and then the drought

Exercise 1: Write a Poem Badly

Pick a poem that you've admired, and write it badly. That is, write it without any figurative language at all. Plain spoken and direct, no embellishments. Read the poem you've written and the original side by side.

Exercise 2: Use Anaphora

You've read Cathryn Cofell's poem "The Day Her Speech Was Slurred**,"** which uses anaphora, Christopher Smart (1722–1771) wrote *Jubilate Agno* and a large section of this work begins with the speaker considering his cat, named Geoffory. The lines begin with the same work "For" and borrow similar structures. Read this delightful excerpt from *Jubilate Agno*. Use anaphora in the poem you'll write about something you love or despise.

Exercise 3: Go Concrete

Pick any of these abstract concepts: time, love, death, health, youth, spring. Come up with four images about it and four experiences you have had. I'll walk you through an example. The abstract concept I'll use is death.

four images

- a white tombstone with an eroded lamb on it
- a bird's body below a tree
- hearing a hospital machine beep without stopping
- the coppery taste of dirt

four experiences

- when the guards of honor folded the flag from my grandfather's coffin
- walking to school with my kids and seeing the sunflowers go to seed a little more each day
- watching my uncle take a picture of my great grandmother in her coffin
- pulling the paper-thin skin thin on my grandmother's hand

Now, let a few select images and/or experiences guide your poem. You don't need to use all eight, just a few. There is one thing you can't include, and that's the abstract word, so in the poem I write from this list, "death" can't appear anywhere in the poem, and that includes the title.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Forms, Forms, Forms

"It is the artist's job to make form. Not even to make it, but to allow it." - Brenda Hillman

The forms of poems often have historic and geographic origins: the haiku from Japan, a ghazal from Arabic roots, the villanelle from France, and some forms such as the prose poem are born as a reaction against a literary movement, and some forms, like the Golden Shovel, have been invented recently. A form in poetry is simply a way to organize sounds, rhythm, lines, and patterns. Lyn Hejinian says, "Writing's forms are not merely shapes. But forces; formal questions are about dynamics–they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, direction, number, and velocities of a work's motion." Forms are a way to both contain and explode what a poem can do.

Like the chapter on figurative language, our work here is an introduction. We will look at Western form, an Eastern form, and a more modern form, but for a more comprehensive resource on forms, head back to Poet's.org Glossary of Poetic Terms, which contains definitions, descriptions, and examples of common and obscure forms. A great print resource is Robert Hass's book, *On Form*, which looks at form according to line numbers: one, two, three, four.

Sonnet

The word "sonnet" is almost synonymous with "form" in the tradition of Western poetry. Sonnet is Italian for "little song," and likely comes from the musing of Italian monks circa 1100. Petrarch (1304-1374) wrote many sonnets and the Italian sonnet is named after him; the Petrarchian sonnet is composed of eight lines (an octave with the rhyme scheme of ABBAABBA) and a six lines (a sestet with the rhyme scheme of CDECDE or a variation of these sounds). Sir Thomas Whyatt (1503–1542) popularized the sonnet in England, but the English sonnet is named after Shakespeare, who famously wrote 154 sonnets. The Shakespearean sonnet is comprised of three quatrains, with this rhyme scheme ABAB CDCD EFEF and is followed by an heroic couplet GG at the end. Unlike other forms, there are no stanza breaks in a traditional sonnet. You already know from the chapter on endings and beginnings that a sonnet contains a volta, which is a change in argument or direction. In a Petrachan sonnet, this comes between the octave and sestet and in a Shakepsearen sonnet the volta occurs between the last quatrain and heroic couplet.

Poetry, too, evolves, so no form is static. Many folks have played with the sonnet form, notably Robert Frost and John Berryman, whose *Dream Songs* are a kind of "near-sonnet." Most recently, Diane Suess won the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for *frank: sonnets* a collection of work

illustrating how elastic the form is, even within a fourteen line container. In one of her sonnets, Suess writes, "The sonnet, like poverty, teaches you what you can do / without." Writing in form teaches us what to leave out. If you are intimidated by writing in form or feel that it confines you, Suess reminds you why writing in form is important–you put on the page only what's necessary for the poem. Even if you don't identify as a formalist poet, writing in a received form is a constraint exercise that stretches your skills. You'll learn new words, experiment with syntax, and surprise yourself with what appears on the page.

Below are two sonnets that appeared in the NAR. The first sonnet is more experimental and the second sonnet is more traditional.

Sonnet Studies #2 by Sean Cho A

Outside your window. the loud white snow.
it doesn't matter who has unloved you
today we don't have to talk about what's
in your glove box. on his way to work
the sun bear sees many cars on the side
of the road. some engines on fire. many
people will be without telephone service
for days weeks maybe longer, lets now talk
about bear cubs or haggle with life insurance lawyers

*

The sun bears have enough star fruits to end world hunger ten times over
but of course i don't really mean hunger and of course this time the sun
bear is me (surprise!). the sun bear doesn't like to think about the possibility
that he has everything he could possibly need to have happiness. he likes
hope because it gives him something to be hopeful for.

Sonnet for My Comrade in Room 11 of the Whitman Motor Lodge by Martín Espada

> *Now, dearest comrade, life me to your face,*
> *We must separate awhile–Here! Take from my lips this kiss.*
> *-Walt Whitman*

I see the traffic on Long Island, amd the fumes of Jericho Turnpike,
And the shoppers invading the Whitman Mall like a lost city of gold,
and the tartan carpet in the lobby of the Whitman Motor Lodge,
and the clogged Raisin Bran dispenser at the breakfast bar,
and the hair in the nose of the desk clerk bickering over the AAA discount,
and the burnt lampshade, and the bath mat like a black rubber waffle,

and the floor luminous with Lysol, and the cartoons on television,
and I say this is good, and Whitman would have said this is good,
since you are here with me, dearest comrade, at the Whitman
Motor Lodge, and would brave the fuming traci of Jeicho Turnpike,
and the army of the bankrupt stampeding away from the mall,
and the spirits haunting Room 11, stubborn as cigarette smoke,
to call me your bearded poet, and tung on my gray beard,
and lift me to your face, and take from my lips this kiss.

Prose Poem

As a reaction against the traditional verse of the early 19th century, German and French poets began writing poems without out line breaks, notably Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) in Germany and later Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) in France. The prose poem is a poem written without line breaks and uses fragmentation, compression, repetition, and internal rhyme, as well as the span of figurative language. It's the repetition and compression that provide the cadence of a poem written in a prose style. Prose poems are typically one paragraph, either in a typographical block, like Katie Prince's poem in chapter two, or they can stretch from margin to margin, like this poem "Office Hours" by Bridgette Bates.

It's also worth noting that Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) created the haibun, mixing elements of haiku with prose. Haibun are popular in Western poetry, and "More than the Birds, Bees, and Trees: A Closer Look at Writing Haibun" by Aimee Nezhukumatathil is a great resource to learn more about using this form.

Tanka and Haiku

Most students were introduced to the haiku at some point in secondary school. Likely, they wrote their own haiku, a three line poem of seventeen syllables using the syllable pattern of 5/7/5 across the lines. Traditional haiku use images from nature, often these images (plum, cherry) have cultural significance. If you've ever read a haiku translated from Japanese and the syllable count is off, this is because of translation, particularly working from a language that is both ideographic and phonetic.

A form similar to the haiku is the tanka, a five line poem of thirty-one syllables, using the syllable pattern of 5/7/5/7/7 across the lines. I was introduced to tanka, a Japanese form through the work of American poet, Haryette Mullen. I read *Urban Tumbleweed* in one setting. In the preface, "On Starting a Tanka Diary," Mullen explains that her goal was to connect walking with her life as a writer, so for one year she took a walk with her notebook with her on these "tanka walks," and the result is 366 tanka in *Urban Tumbleweed*. She uses what she calls a "flexible line" and her tanka are mainly three lines with a variation of 10/11/10 syllables. Traditional tanka

are usually written as one sentence, and you'll recall from the chapter on endings and beginnings that tanka have a kind of volta or upper and lower poem.

Every semester I teach our introductory to creative writing class, I follow Mullen's example and take my students on a "tanka walk." I live in the midwest, so we visit the controlled climate of our campus greenhouse run by the biology department. The spring semester visits are the most spectacular. The earthy smell greets us at the doors. We leave the sideways snow and enter a kingdom of glass and pipes, below which tropical plants bloom and cacti flower while a mean midwestern winter persists on beyond the panes. A greenhouse is the perfect setting for the upper poem and lower poem and reminds me of Mullen's juxtaposition (urban and tumbleweed) that she discovered while walking Los Angeles with its bright, blooming bougainvillea and orange and avocado trees against a city stitched together by jammed freeways.

Here are a few tanka my creative writing students wrote after our greenhouse tanka walks.

[Taller than these trees] by Coy Cummings

Taller than these trees
Peppers are smaller than thumbs
Snow piles outside
Wind cries just before the glass
Safety of a nursery

[Take a nap when I touch you…] by Elana Williams

Take a nap when I touch you, *Mimosa pudica*.
Look up! Look up! Shirk first from my sight.
I'm a liar, a fraud. If not embraced, who am I?

[Flesh lacks chemical] by Connor Ferguson

Flesh lacks chemical
substance and pulse, slips of sheets
glued, paper mache,
veins, blue ink of his life quiet
like the lips I help stitch shut.

Below is a poem that first appeared in the NAR by contributor Nicole Cooley. You'll notice that she uses a different form entirely, letting each tanka function as a "line" or "stanza" in her poem. This is a good reminder that forms, even strict ones, can be made flexible.

Marriage Tanka by Nicole Cooley

i.
When Shakespeare's Corialanus greeted his wife, he called her "my gracious silence." Or was it not "my greatest silence?"

ii.
Build a Shrine to the Unlucky. To the Misfortunate. The Tubercular Wife who died too early, lungs wool-clotted.

iii.
The wild roses climb the fence like bad girls, into the neighbor's yard, ravenous, then as we sleep at night—gasoline drowned.

iv.
Outside, the street furred with dark. In our bedroom, my legs hooked over your shoulders. Cold lamplight rinses the night sky clean.

v.
In Spenser's Amoretti the beloved never speaks back. I swallow the poems like bad candy, choke on the wife.

vi
Marriage: over and over a re-telling. A dress to wear for days on end. A dress to shuck off, stuff the bed.

vii.
Husbandless: a bowl of dry ice. Husbandless: thimble to protect a finger, little silver stump. Husbanded.

viii.
The cassone, or marriage chest, given to the bride by her parents at the wedding. Gold, to hold her clothes. Most resembles a casket.

vix.
Green lush silence is its own shrine to marriage. As is the wife who did not die. The wife who wore the tight black wedding dress.

Exercise 1: Pick a Form

Spend one of your writing times browsing this resource Poets.org's Glossary of Poetic Terms or Edward Hrisch's: *A Poet's Glossary* and read about familiar and foreign forms. Pick a few to experiment with, ones that are fun and interesting. Here are a few tried and tested forms that work with this kind of exercise: Abecedarian, Sestina, and Villanelle.

Exercise 2: Take a Tanka Walk

Take a tanka walk like Mullen describes in her introduction and/or like I describe in the section on tanka. You can be familiar with the place, but it's best if the environment is somewhat new to you. Receive the environment with a beginner's mindset, "shoshin" in Zen Buddhism, which means to approach with curiosity, openness, without any preconceptions. Even if you are an expert, you set this knowledge aside and put observation, question, and delight up front. Have experiences, not expectations. Take pictures. Record and/or look up the genius and species. Become Claude Monet and record the passage of light. Revisit the place at the same or a different time of day. Get curious about what you're observing. Write a tanka, and you have options for form.

- use the traditional 5/7/5/7/7 syllable pattern across five lines
- use Mullen's flexible line where 31 syllables are split across three lines: 10/11/10, 11/10/10, 9/11/11 or any adjacent variation
- use Cooley's notion of a 31 syllable "sentence," a type of prose line for the tanka

Exercise 3: Forms are Flexible

Language evolves, and so does how we use it. Forms are flexible, which is how new forms emerge and how we have a rich sonnet tradition with many different types of sonnet. Pick any form and change it up. If you are working with a villanelle, maybe only part of a line repeats. If you are working with a pantoum, maybe the lines repeat slightly out of order. Note, if this exercise intimidates you, start with the sonnet, which has had many iterations of the form.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Go to the Image

"The better the poem, the harder it is to talk about." - Matthew Zapruder

In graduate school, as semester workshop assignments were announced, we all speculated about how well our work was received based on which writer's workshop to which we were assigned. If we were assigned the visiting writer with national awards and recent, notable publications, it was assured we were doing well. During the third semester, many of us were disappointed when we didn't get to study with the workshop's Wunderkind, but we were each offered a private workshop with him.

The gray winter afternoon before my workshop, I was so nervous, I could barely utter anything about the five paltry poems I'd written for the workshop. Likely, they were set in the Appalachian mountains, and vaguely pastoral. I watched as [____] twisted his arms and legs into knots while describing and narrating my poems, but suddenly he stopped and asked, "Do you go to where your poems are?"

Not understanding what he was asking, I answered, "Yes, I've been there."

"No," he insisted earnestly. "I mean do you go there? There, where the creek is winding behind the church with the dingy asbestos shingles. The road has the same cursive bends of the creek and no one bothered to paint a centerline."

For a second, I thought he's been to the Primitive Baptist Church in Flag Pond, Virginia that I was writing about because he'd described it so perfectly, but I noticed that his eyes were closed as he was talking. Then he pushed his palms together, weaving the air, exactly like the creek he was describing. He was imagining it and thus describing it, not describing it because he'd been there. The cart can go before the horse in poetry. It does not matter if the place, person, or thing is real or not, and certainly not if the writer has firsthand knowledge or experience of it. Rather, what counts is how richly the writer can describe the imagery. You have to go to where you are writing.

In *The Art of Description* by Mark Doty he writes that "information is the driest and least revealing of essential twenty-first century words, and the data that senses offer every waking moment is anything but that." Indeed, living in the information age brings the difficult task of sorting what is information, what is detail, and what is description. Often, newer writers mistake detail, a kind of information for description, but description should be more of an experience. Don't mistake detail for description, they are sisters, not twins.

Adjectives and Verbs

Adjectives are often considered the workhorses of descriptions because adjectives modify nouns and explain how; yet, it is verbs that bring action and experience. Take a look at the poem below by NAR contributor Diana Babineau. In the first stanza alone: “installed,” “gave,” “curling,” “pulled,” and “straightening” are the verbs, while “dark,” “brown,” “soft,” and “wood” are the adjectives. Not only do the verbs outnumber the adjectives, but the adjectives are a bit more prosaic than the verbs. Verbs show, too. As you read Babineau’s poem, notice the ratio of verbs to adjectives, as well as any sensory language that refers to touch, taste, sight, sound, smell. How many verbs can you feel yourself doing or being done to you?

The Brush by Diana Babineau

> *The shooting stars in your black hair*
> *in bright formation*
> *are flocking where,*
> *so straight, so soon?*
> –Elizabeth Bishop

Before my dad installed wood floors,
my mother’s room
had carpet, dark brown threads
that gave way to
my toes, curling themselves in soft plush
as she pulled and pulled at my hair, straightening it all

into tight formation. I focused on
the television:
Tom and Jerry trying to snap
a paw or sever
a tail. I smiled at their failures, their mis-
channeled love. (What would one be

without the other?) Everything
was brushed into
manageable decency and I wondered
about these daily
rituals of hurt. My scalp adjusted,
grew tougher, and I thought all pain must dull

eventually. When the wood was cut
to size, polished
smooth, hammered into neat
rows, my toes

no longer curled into softness. I'd grown
strong, I thought. But the bright blond boards

revealed the mess–unruly black
strands to be swept
aside. I was taught to collect these pieces,
then discard. I learned
we leave parts of ourselves everywhere, though
mostly at the feet of our loved ones.

Sensory Language

In Babineau's poem, the speaker of this poem recalls a painful childhood ritual that causes pain to her body. Just as the infant first processes the world through the body (hunger, warmth, satiety, noise) the writer, too, constructs their image primarily through senses. A kind of shortcut to description is using sensory language, which draws upon experience gathered from the five senses: touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. Constructing sensory descriptions can be a beautiful union of adjective and verb combinations. An easy example of this is to describe a beloved kitchen or family dish. For example, my grandmother's cornbread had a rich buttery smell, simultaneously grainy and greasy, the batter sizzled as she poured it into the hot iron skillet.

In *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, the author, Julia Cameron asserts, "Art is born in attention. Its midwife is detail. Art may seem to spring from pain, but perhaps that is because pain serves to focus our attention onto details (for instance, the excruciatingly beautiful curve of a lost lover's neck). Art may seem to involve broad strokes, grand scheme, great plans. But it is the attention to detail that stays with us; the singular image is what haunts us and becomes art." In vernacular, what Cameron is saying is that the devil is in the description. Images, sensory language, and active verbs are description.

There is also a mixing of the senses known as synesthesia (not to be confused with the neurological condition of synesthesia), but the literary device of synesthesia, which is an intermingling or swapping of different senses at once. The mixture of senses creates intrigue and new combinations of language (check link for examples).

Exercise 1: Go to the Image

For this exercise, you can either pick a poem you'd like to revise or start with an image you recall. In the example I gave earlier, I was trying to recall the Primitive Baptist Church in Flag Pond, Virginia. Decide on your image in the revision or new work. First, recall the image and take as many notes about it as you can about the image. If you don't have enough after

recollection, use a photo or do research online, such as an image search; Google street view comes in hand if your image is a property or place. However, remember you are describing, so imagine, don't report.

Let language, not the idea, guide your work. Select active and/or unexpected verbs to help describe the image. The weirdness and joy in poetry come when the reader is surprised, whether through an unexpected line break or with an odd twist of image. When a noun is modified by something unexpected like a *briney afternoon* or *soft cursing from the kitchen*, the combination adds interest to the image, but also precision of experience. Go to the image and let the language lead the way.

Exercise 2: Sensory List

Pick an object, like a lemon or a glass of water, or sit under a tree and try to notice something from each category: touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. Below are a few examples.

- touch: the numbness in your fingers on a cold walk
- taste: something too sweet or too salty
- sight: the thinness of a shadow
- sound: the squeaky brakes of the car in front of you
- smell: the smell of acrid greens cooking

Start the poem with the observation of the sensation. Invent what caused the sensation and wherever the poem goes, let it, but remember a detail is not description. A detail tells; it's information. Whereas a description shows or attempts to mimic an experience. Get your reader to have the same experience as your speaker.

Exercice 3: Verbs

Write a poem that begins with a verb and ends with either a verb or an action. While writing this poem, think about verbs as showing words.

CHAPTER NINE

The Difficult Simplicity of Short Poems and Killing Darlings

"The secret of boring people is to tell them everything." - Anton Checkhov

I have lots to say about revision, because I've spent most of my writing life as a revisionist rather than a writer. I suffered–sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, from workshop demons. Even while writing this paragraph, I have cut more than contributed at my final stage of revision. If something I share is useful, great, if not, no worries. You will find a revision process that works for you. However, listen to EVERYTHING a short poem has to tell you. I have learned the most about revision and what makes a poem (of any length) great from shorter poems, which is why I'm covering them in a chapter on revision. Just take a look at these two masterclasses.

- "The Two-Headed Calf" by Laura Gilpin
- "Sonoma Fire" by Jane Hirshfield

The Short Poem as Teacher

With notably less space on the page, a short poem has fewer tools (words) with which to make meaning. This economy of words necessitates a sparse precision. A short poem has to know what it's saying and has to do so in a compact space. A short poem's final form (the product) is like revising (the process). When I revise a poem, especially if it really needs a lot of work, often the first thing I have to figure out is what the poem is trying to say. When you read a great short poem (see above ♡) it is like the poem was born knowing what it needed and wanted to say, but this is not the case. A short poem likely got there through stringent revision, perhaps even more so than longer poems.

In the first chapter's exercise, I referenced attending a writing weekend with Jane Hirshfiled, titled, "Writing Poems With a Generous Heart Facing in Ten Directions." In one of her talks, Hirshfield often spoke of poetry the same way she did of mindfulness and Buddhism. She said things like, "The practice [poetry or mindfulness or Buddhism] is just as much about catching yourself off track and getting on the track." In her smiling voice, she quietly added, "Poetry is the act of attention." A poem as the act of attention has become a mantra for me, both as an editor and as a writer. The act of reading a poem is attention. No matter how long or short the poem is, it should hold your attention. In my experience, short poems interest you, then destroy you with their accuracy, because the poet was paying attention. There is nothing that does not need to be there.

Below are two shorter poems that appeared in the NAR. The first is a form poem, and the second is devastatingly wonderful. Please read them several times. In the first read, check for

comprehension, and in the second look for understanding, and the third dissect how the poet did it.

Apprenticeship by Adam Vines

He butters up the corners, base
And fishtails, tamps the brick in place,
Then rasps the trowel across the joint.
He butters up the corners, base
Then slides the chock and plumb line up.
“Boy, scrape my mudboard, keep it wet.”
He butters up the corners, base
And fishtails, tamps the bricks in place.

This short poem is a triolet, an eight line form where certain lines are repeated, so only three lines in this form are original from the others. The repetition mimics the difficult act of laying brick and being an apprenticeship with much to learn. Forms, particularly short forms like the triolet, haiku, and tanka are great exercises for concision.

He Said Yes by Catherine Pritchard Childress

He called it our *marital bed*, declared it time to return;
leave our daughter’s twin–my retreat since he’d said yes.
Did you kiss her? Yes. More? Yes. Everything.

In three lines, this speaker learns of a betrayal in their marriage. Notice the expectations you have after reading the title, and how they are subverted with each line, but particularly the last line. In three lines, the reader learns of the affair, has their expectations change, and is left at the speaker’s flashback to the confirmation about the affair. What a journey through time and the heart in three lines!

Other short poems to study are haiku and tanka. In particular, these books are great to have in your collection.

- *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa* by Robert Hass
- *Urban Tumbleweed: Notes from a Tanka Diary* by Harriet Mullen

Revision is Re-vision

The act of revision is right here in the word, revision is re-vision–a reseeing of the poem, both for its failures and possibilities. Revision is not editing. Editing is checking work for grammar, punctionion, and clarity. Revision is going back to an origin and testing it again, taking risks, pinching off the deadheads, putting out suckers in a new direction.

Revision is brave work. Revision means being open to the opinions of others, as well as taking risks and allowing a poem to take a final form that you initially did not intend or even see as a possibility. It can mean cutting out work you labored to bring to the page. Below is an eleven line poem we published in the NAR.

Rib by Hope Wabuke

between his stomach
and his heart

that place
taken from

other animals
and eaten

with barbecue
and applesauce

licked clean
and then thrown

to the dog

Would you believe that this poem was originally four pages? The May/June 2022 issue of *Poets & Writers* ran a feature on Hope Wabuke, who had this to say about the revision process of not only the poem above, but how working with an NAR editor shifted her understanding of revision in general:

> While working on *The Body Family* for the past ten years, Wabuke says literary journal editors have often allowed her to "see more clearly the center of a poem or themes running through the poems." When she sent a "sprawling four-page narrative poem" to the *North American Review*, for example, editor J. D. Schraffenberger replied that he saw a complete eleven-line poem within the sprawl. Wabuke happily agreed, and the print journal published the edited poem, "Rib," in 2015. Wabuke says it changed how she thinks as a poet, teacher, and editor: "It was a pivotal learning experience about scope and resonance and finding the crystalline center of a poem.

When Wabuke talks of "finding the crystalline center of a poem," she's speaking about finding a poem's guts, what it really is. Some people call this "the heart of a poem," or the "poem's center." However you think of it, know that it's the essential part that belongs on the page and

your revision should serve what the poem wants, which is not always aligned with what you wanted, at least when you first wrote the poem.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was a famous revisor, revising “Song of Myself” many times before his death. As part of the NAR’s series Every Atom, a commemoration of Whitman 200 years after his birth, I wrote about seeing part of Whitman’s manuscript at the Huntington Library. I hovered over the case, trying to imagine his journey of changing thoughts. On the page, a line read, “And to me each acre of the earth and sea”, and in much darker and bolder ink, he’s crossed out “earth” and written “land” above it. The difference between those two words might not seem like much at first glance, but they are incredible differences. When I show my students an image of this page and ask them the difference between “earth” and “land,” and how the implications of each word changes the line, they talk about: dirt, farming, grandfathers, ownership, boundaries, outer space, planets, water, ocean, the sea. When we hear “earth” we likely picture our blue and green planet hanging in the dark of space, but this image wasn’t even available to Whitman who died fifty-four years before the first picture of earth from outer space. Language evolves, and words expand and collapse to describe our understanding. If you’ve never paused at the *Oxford English Dictionary* in a library, it’s worth a trip to look up a word whose history you’re curious about. The OED will tell you the word’s language origin, when it came into use in the English language, provide examples, and note major changes in the word’s meaning or usage. An OED will point out that even languages revise themselves.

Apocryphal stories of poets lamenting over whether or not to place a comma at the end of a line are commonplace. That’s not the scope of this text, but let’s go somewhat micro-revision and take a look at wording within lines. Go to grammar and consider the action and agency in your sentences and lines of poetry, meaning what or who is the agent in the line and whether or not they are doing the action, being acted upon, or some force outside the poem is doing the action. Take a simple sentence, “Brad throws the ball.” Brad is the agent, the who or what (noun) and he is, indeed, doing the action, throwing the ball. One of the marvels of poetry is its viny syntax. Let’s look at Babineau's poem “The Brush” from the previous chapter. Below is the first stanza. As you read it, think about agency and action.

Before my dad installed wood floors,
my mother’s room
had carpet, dark brown threads
that gave way to
my toes, curling themselves in soft plush
as she pulled and pulled at my hair, straightening it all

The dad did one thing, installed wood floors, but that was before the tangle or carpet and hair, which is the real crux of the poem. The dad has less to do in the poem than the mother and daughter, so what does placing him in the starting position of the poem do? What if the poem opened this way?

My mother’s room

before my dad installed wood floors,
had carpet, dark brown threads

Or

My toes curled themselves in soft plush
before my dad installed wood floors

Each rearrangement of the opening changes the meaning, as well as the agent and action. All this is to say, don't accept each sentence, phrase, or clause as received and final. Move the words around and play, which will be a challenge to most native English speakers, whose sentence structure is dependent on syntax or word order, but do it. The order you received the words and images as a writer is not necessarily their final order on the page. A poet has many tools in their favor: line breaks, not using punctuation, a poem's natural dichotomy of meaning. Remember that in poetry most words or doing at least two or more things at once. Let the word order sound a little strange, and just experiment as the words find their way.

Many students new to workshop are leary of revision, and rightly so, because anyone who has written much knows how much wrestling it took to put the best words in the best order on the page. If you make a cut, you're cutting work, and not just work, but likely something that is personal and precious to you. If you are a writer who finds revision difficult, here are a few things you can try.

- Write the poem and then cold case it. Put it away and don't think about it. For a minimum of two weeks, leave it alone. There really is no maximum to this. I've heard of poets finding drafts from years ago, drafts they have even forgotten they wrote. When you're ready to revise, do so. I often revise with my notebook out, where I've recorded interesting words and phrases. Often, I've looked up these words in the OED, which allows me to think about them differently.
- Tell yourself revising poems like trying on clothes. Take all your ideas back to the dressing room, and no one has to see. Try them all on, even the crazy ones. Move the last line up to the first line. Take a sharp left turn early in the poem. See if the poem fits into a form, like a sestina or vinelle. No one has to know, but you.
- Keep records, which will differ if you are a paper or digital drafter. I am mainly a digital drafter, so if I'm hesitant about completely deleting a previous draft, I add "VER X" at the end of the file extension. "VER" stands for "version" and "X" stands for the number of times I've revised a poem. At AWP, I once asked a car full of poets what the most times they've ever revised a poem was. No one answered hence, the infamous Paul Valery quote, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned."

A Note on Workshop

"Art lives upon discussion," writes Henry James, (1843-1916) "upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints…" To a

great extent, James is describing what a workshop is and what it does. Before workshops were housed in academic institutions, fellow writers shared their work with each other, famously the working and editing relationship between Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

Likely, you're reading this because you're in a college class, where you will be turning in your work and your classmates will workshop it, during which, you will sit silently while they discuss the merits and demerits of your piece. Each teacher leads workshop a bit differently, but this is the historical model they have inherited for better or worse. It's worth noting that other models of workshop are emerging, albeit, slowly. Of course, bad stories about workshops abound, and they can be brutal. Blame is placed on the other writers in the room and the tone set by the teacher. I'll leave these workshop stories to the rumormill of the internet. Our work here is to discuss workshops that promote work. At its best, a workshop is a community that values risk, honesty, and curiosity. I recall one of my graduate workshop teachers telling us to "check our egos at the door," which is good advice. Ideally, a workshop is not about people–that is the person who wrote the piece or the person offering critique. A workshop is about the work on the page. Period.

One of the best, although dated texts, I've read about workshop is Phil Levine's *The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography*, which recounts some of the earlier days of the Writers' Workshop, when Levine was a student of John Berryman after studying with Robert Lowell. Levine recounts the early days of the Iowa Workshop and his stellar classmates: W. D. Snodgrass, Donald Justice, Paul Petrie, Robert Dana, Constance Urdang, Jane Cooper, Donald Finkel, and Henri Coulette. Levine offers the reminder that the reward of writing a good poem is writing a good poem, not workshop.

During my undergraduate workshop, which I discussed earlier, we read poems by other poets: James Wright, Louise Gluck, William Wordsworth, Wallace Stevens, Horace, Keats, Tomaz Salaman, for the first half of our three hour class. This frustrated some students who wanted our class to consist only of our poems. Rick's nonverbal message remained vital: to learn to write poems, you have to learn to read poems. He brought in finer examples of our meager aspirations. If a student wrote an elegy, Rick presented Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard and Larry Levis's "Elegy Ending in the Sound of a Skipping Rope." He was teaching us to write, by teaching us to read. The students paying attention learned more from these poems than from our naive attempts.

I'm still in touch with writers from Rick's workshop, and a few are still my first readers, with whom I share early drafts of work. The students in your workshop class will offer you feedback, but it's also important that you form lasting relationships with writers whose work you admire and trust. A workshop is a community, not a class.

You wear two hats in workshop: the poet and the critic. If you are the poet, your work is being discussed. Take what you hear with a grain of salt. Some of the feedback will be valuable to you and some of it will not. Also, how you understand the feedback will change over time. You are not the same poet at the end of the day that you were at the start of the day. If you are the critic,

your job is the gift of attention toward another's work. Take the role seriously. Tell the poet what the poem does well and places where you wanted the poem to do more of confused you. Read the poem in the tradition it is following or breaking. Be earnest. Be engaged.

Exercise 1: Kill Your Darlings

First, remember this is only an exercise, It's play, there is no permanent delete, so be brave and have fun. Dust off a piece you've written within six months to two weeks ago. It's important that the piece is "cold" and the attachments are fading, so that you can make the necessary incisions and excisions. Maybe you can work with a piece that has been through workshop. Pick an image, a clause, a few lines, maybe just a combination of alliterative words that hold your interest. Cut the rest, for now, or forever, TBD. Don't worry about that now. Instead, use one of these tactics below and add in one or two of the concepts we've covered:

- let the words invite their kith and kin
- include a line or part of a line from a poem you admire
- use alliteration or assonance based on these words
- try writing the opposite of that you first said
- experiment with line breaks that aren't typical for you
- pick a title that feels different from your normal titling convention
- include three of the five senses

Exercise 2: Write an Erasure Poem

Deciding what to leave out of a poem is a good exercise to practice when thinking about revision. An erasure poem is a poem you write when you leave out (erase) or blackout words, phrases, and or sentences from an existing text. Essentially, you are creating a new text from an old one. Students have written erasure poems from junk mail, pages of novels, letters, old diaries, instruction manuals.

Recently, the poet Kate Baer has soared to fame for erasure poems she creates from people messaging her on social media with criticism about feminism, her work, motherhood, and body shaming her. She posts much of her process on Instagram. She's made the *New York Times bestseller* list three times, so no matter what you think of her work, her poetry is intersecting with politics and culture.

Find source material and write an erasure poem.

Exercise 3: Revise a Published Poem

Recall what Paul Valery said, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned." Whether or not this is true, is up to the poet and their particular poem in question, but the premise serves as a

useful exercise. Below is a poem that we published and it captivated me when I first read it in Submittable, perhaps because of its assertiveness and experimentation with time, the unexpected, yet effective stanza break. I love how the poem covers so much time. Revise this poem anyway you see fit. Here are some ideas to get you started.

- revise the poem so it is one sentence
- write the poem from the a wasp's point of view
- write the poem in the present only, no past recollections
- have the speaker admit something
- turn this poem into a tanka

The Wasps by Jason Tandon

Eleven years they have returned to nest in the hollow doors
of our gray plastic storage shed. Just now I saw one enter
on this warm May morning and remembered
how I used to kill them
with cans of chemical spray.
It took years
before I learned
to stand still,
let them zip around my ears

till they flew off
for an hour or so
as if I were
a prospective buyer
touring an open house.

Authors

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