tried to indicate the purpose of each one. In the meantime, however, they are presented to instructors only, in an online supplement to take or leave.

It often seems pretty well impossible to teach a course across the genres—a semester to do everything, as if you were asked to teach “Intro to Human Nature” or “The History of Work” in sixteen weeks. My hope is that this book will make it feel a little more possible. What Imaginative Writing is not, however, is comprehensive. It tries to cover the basics in a way that is sound but brief, overwhelming to neither the student nor the personality and methods of the instructor. I will be interested to hear from anyone who teaches from the book how well I have succeeded in this, and how I might improve the book in future editions (jbutroway@fsu.edu).

Meanwhile, I am grateful to numbers of people, especially my colleagues at Florida State, Northwestern, and Chicago Dramatists; and always to my students and former students. Many of the readings, ideas, and exercises in this book are here thanks to their talent, invention, and spirited help. Creative writing exercises tend to be, like scientific information in a more generous time, freely offered, freely shared, and passed from hand to hand. I know that I have cadged, cobbled, and adapted my “Try This” exercises from Marta Mihalyi, Maria Irene Fones, Aimee Beal, Margaret Rozga, Sarah Ruhi, Paula Vogel, Cheri1l Dumasini, Laurla-Gray Street, Mary Ann Lando, Gerald Shapiro, Matt Zambrino, and Michael Kardos, many of them from the pedagogy panels of the Associated Writing Programs. Other ideas will have come to me thirdhand, or I will have forgotten where I read or heard them; to those unacknowledged, equal thanks and apologies.

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CHAPTER 1

Invitation to the Writer

The lesson I learn over and over again—and then forget over and over again—is that writing won’t be so bad once you get into it. One’s reluctance is immensely powerful… It seems tiny in the grand arc of a person’s life narrative, but it’s the most insidious, powerful thing.

Tony Kushner

WARM-UP

Regard the art on the cover of this book. Relax, focus, take in the colors and the composition. Then freewrite a page of anything it suggests to you, reminds you of, or makes you feel. You don’t need to make sense or sentences, nor stick to the subject. Just let it flow. Put the page away for a week. Take it out and see: Is there anything here you might use? Any idea worth more thought? Any phrase or image to pursue?

You . . .

You started learning to write—at the latest—as soon as you were born. You learned within hours to recognize an “audience,” and within a few days that expressing yourself would elicit a response. Your basic desires created the fundamental form of story—I want, I want, I WANT!—with its end in gratification (comedy) or denial (tragedy). Within a year you had begun to understand the structure of sentences and to learn rules of immense subtlety and complexity, so that for no precisely understood reason you would always say “little red wagon” rather than “red little wagon.” You responded to rhythm and rhyme (One, two. Buckle my shoe.). You matched images and explained their meanings (This is a giraffe. Dog is hungry.). You invented metaphors (My toes are soldiers.). By the time you could speak, you were putting together personal essays about what you had done and what had happened to you and forecasting fantasies of your future exploits. By the time you started school,
you had (mostly thanks to television) watched more drama than the nobility of the Renaissance, and you understood a good deal about how a character is developed, how a joke is structured, how a narrative expectation is met, and how dramatic exposition, recognition, and reversal are achieved. You understood the unspoken rules of specific traditions—that Bugs Bunny may change costume but the Road Runner may not, that the lovers will marry, that the villain must die.

You are, in fact, a literary sophisticate. You have every right to write.

This needs saying emphatically and often, because writing is one of those things—like public speaking, flying, and garden snakes—that tends to call up unnecessary panic. Such fear is both normal (a high percentage of people feel it) and irrational (statistically, the chances of disaster are pretty low). It is true that some speakers do humiliate themselves, some planes do crash, some snakes are poisonous. Nevertheless, people do learn to speak, fly, and garden. And people learn to shrug at their dread and write.

... and writing ...

All writing is imaginative. The translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process. Although there is certainly such a thing as truth in writing, and we can spot falsity when we encounter it in print, these qualities are hard to define, hard to describe, and do not always depend on factual accuracy or inaccuracy. Often what is most original—that is, imaginative—is precisely what “rings true.”

Aristotle said that when you change the form of a thing you change its purpose. For example, the purpose of an algebra class is to teach algebra. But if you take a photo of the class, the purpose of the photo cannot be to teach algebra. The picture would probably serve the purpose of commemorating the class and the people in it. On the other hand, if you wrote a short story about that class, its purpose might be (not to teach algebra or to commemorate the class, but) to reveal something about the emotional undertow, the conflict in or between students, the hidden relationships in that apparently staid atmosphere.

It’s impossible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in words, because words are of a different form than experience, and their choice is determined by the vast array of cultural and personal influences. Writers learn very quickly that a written incident is not necessarily credible because it “really happened,” and that convincing writing is in the writing and not in the facts. When you write about an experience, you put it in a new form and therefore furnish it with a new purpose. Part of the hard work and the pleasure of writing is discovering what that purpose is. You will never exactly “catch” an experience you have lived, but you may both discover and reveal new insights in the recasting of that experience.

All writing is autobiographical as well as invented. Just as it’s impossible to write the whole and literal truth about any experience, so it’s also impossible to invent without drawing on your own experience, which has furnished your brain. Your view of yourself, the place you live, the people you know, the institutions you live with, your view of nature and God or the gods will inform not only your dreams and daydreams, what you say, wear, think, and do, but also everything you write. What you write will inevitably reveal to a certain extent both what you think the world is like and what you think it should be like.

Between the two impossibilities—of perfectly capturing your experience in words and of avoiding it altogether—lies the territory that we call “creative.” Begin by writing whatever comes to you, recording your observations, trying out your ideas, indulging your fantasies. Then figure out what you want to make of it, what its purpose is, and what it means. Then work toward making it “work”—that is, toward making it meaningful for the reader who is your partner in the imaginative act.

... and reading ...

At the same time, you yourself need to become a reader of a writerly sort. This means reading greedily, not just for entertainment but also focusing on the craft, the choices, and techniques of the author; “reading the greats.” In novelist Alan Cheuse’s words, “in that peculiar way that writers read, attentive to the peculiarities of the language...soaking up numerous narrative strategies and studying various approaches to that cave in the deep woods where the human heart hibernates.”

When you study a piece of writing as a student of literature, you focus on understanding what is there on the page and how the parts fit together, in order to tease out the story’s significance. Reading as a writer involves all that, but it is more concentrated, more active, and more selfish. It involves asking not only What does this mean? but also How does it work? Why has the author made this choice of imagery, voice, atmosphere? What techniques of language, pacing, character contribute to this effect? As a writerly reader you pay close attention to the rhythm and flow of the language, to the way word choice influences an effect, to voice and point of view as means of building narrative—in Francine Prose’s words, “not only who was speaking but who was being spoken to, where the listener and speaker were, and when and why the event—that is, the telling of the story—was occurring.” This kind of reading becomes in itself an imaginative act as you put yourself in the position of the author to intuit the reason for her choices. Then the question
naturally occurs: Can I use this effect, try these rhythms, create this sort of atmosphere? It is only one step further to imitation of such strategies, and to using imitation as a way of developing your own skills.

Readers/writers sometimes become impatient with this process. "How do you know the author didn’t just want to do it that way?" The answer is: You don’t. But everything on the page is there because the writer chose that it should be there, and the effectiveness of the piece depends on those choices. The British critic F. R. Leavis used to observe that a poem is not a frog. In order to understand the way a frog works you must kill it, then splay out the various respiratory, digestive, muscular systems, and so forth. But when you “take apart” a piece of literature to discover how it is made, and then put it back together by reading it again, it is more alive than before. It will resonate with all you have learned, and you as a writer will know a little better how to reproduce such vitality.

... and this book...

My creative writing workshop exchanged a few classes with a group of student choreographers. The first time we came into the dance theater, we writers sat politely down in our seats with our notebooks on our laps. The choreographer-dancers did stretches on the carpet, headstands on the steps; some sat backward on the chairs; one folded herself down into a seat like a teabag in a teacup. When they started to dance they were given a set of instructions: Group A is rolling through, up, and under; Group B is blue Tuesday; Group C is weather comes from the west. The choreographers began to invent movement; each made up a “line” of dance. They repeated and altered it. They bumped into each other, laughed, repeated, rearranged, and danced it through. They did it again. They adjusted. They repeated. They danced it through. Nobody was embarrassed and nobody gave up. They tried it again. One of the young writers turned to me with a face of luminous discovery. “We don’t play enough,” she said.

That’s the truth. Writing is such a solitary occupation, and we are so used to mulling at it until it’s either perfect or due, that our first communal experience of our writing also tends to be awful judgment. Even alone, we internalize the criticism we anticipate and become harsh critics of ourselves. “The progress of any writer,” said the great poet Ted Hughes, “is marked by those moments when he manages to outwit his own police system.”

imaginative writing assumes that you will play before you work—dance before performing, doodle before fiddling with, fantasize before forming, anything goes before finish something. This is not an unusual idea among writers and teachers of writing. ("Indulge yourself in your first drafts," says novelist Jonathan Lethem, "and write against yourself in revisions.") But it is easier to preach than to practice.

Nevertheless, most of the techniques that writers use are relevant to most forms of imaginative writing and can be learned by playing around in any form. So the first six chapters of this book talk about some techniques that are useful in any sort of writing or are relevant to more than one genre, and suggest ways to play with those techniques. The purpose of these chapters is to free the imagination. The seventh chapter talks about ways to develop and revise your experiments into a finished piece. The last four chapters discuss what is particular to each of four genres, and how you can mold some of what you have written toward each of them.

Note: The word “genre” can be confusing because it has two distinct but overlapping meanings when applied to writing. In the first definition it refers to the different kinds or forms of literature—nonfiction, poetry, fiction, drama, and so forth—and that is the way it is used throughout this book. In its second meaning; “genre” refers to certain traditions within fiction, as a western, detective story, spy story, romance, science fiction, horror, and so forth. These fiction genres are often discouraged in creative writing courses because they rely on set narrative elements that have less to do with good writing than with the expectations of particular fans.

The romance, for example, must have a plucky heroine, a handsome hero with a secret past, a dark lady, a mansion, a forest, and usually a flight through the woods in scanty clothing. Many instructors feel that whereas learning the techniques of good writing may help you write good genre fiction, learning the particular traditions of a given fictional genre will not necessarily help you write well or honestly in the tradition called “mainstream” or “literary.”

The tendency of recent literature is in any case to move further away from rigid categories, toward a loosening or crossing of genre (in the sense of literary form). Many writers are eager to experiment with pieces that blur the distinction between two genres or even follow two genre patterns at once. So “short short” stories may have elements of poetry or essay; the “prose poem” may be seen as a lyric or a story. An essay might be structured with a refrain. Of course, the drama has always employed techniques across the arts of sight, sound, and movement, and technology has unleashed experimentation unimaginable just a couple of generations ago, from music videos to TV series with Shakespearean ambition. “Comic books” have matured into graphic novels. “Motion poetry” matches poet to artist in moving image; the video essay and the blog pop up on every digital platform. Michael Chabon and others write detective or science fiction with literary ambition and intent—"genre fiction" pressing at the bounds of “the fiction genre” with results that have been called “slipstream” or “interstitial” fiction.

So there is a lot of “do this” in the following pages, but a good deal more of “try this.” The overriding idea of the book is play—serious, strenuous, dedicated, demanding, exhilarating, enthusiastic, repeated, perfected play. It
is the kind of play that makes you a superior swimmer or singer, a first-rank guitar, pool, polo, piano, or chess player. As with any sport or musical skill, a writer's power grows by the practice of the moves and the mastering of the instrument.

Insofar as writing is a skill, it can only be learned by doing. Insofar as writing is "inspired," it may pour out of you obsessively, feverishly, without your seeming to have to make any effort or even without your seeming to have any responsibility for it. When that happens, it feels wonderful, as any writer will tell you. Yet over and over again, writers attest to the fact that the inspiration only comes with, and as a result of, the doing.

...and your journal...

While you use this book you will be writing one—a journal that should be, first of all, a physical object with which you feel comfortable. Some writers keep notes in a shoebox or under the bed, but your journal probably needs to be light enough to carry around easily, sturdy enough to stand up to serious play, large enough to operate as a capacious holdall for your thoughts. Think of it as a handbag, a backpack, a trunk, a cupboard, an attic, a warehouse of your mind. Everything can go into it: stuff you like and what you paid too much for, what Aunt Lou gave you and the thing you found in the road, this out-of-date whatsthis and that high-tech whiz. You never know what you're going to need; absolutely anything may prove useful later on.

TRY THIS 1.1
In other words, write any sort of thing in your journal, and write various kinds of things:
• An observation
• An overheard conversation
• Lists
• Questions I would like answered
• Your response to a piece of music
• A rough draft of a letter
• Names for characters
• Quotations from what you are reading
• The piece of your mind you'd like to give so-and-so
• An idea for a story
• A memory
• A dream
• A few lines of a poem
• A fantasy conversation
• Titles of things you are never going to write
• Something else

Your journal is totally forgiving; it is 100 percent rough draft; it passes no judgments.
Throughout Imaginative Writing there will be prompts, trigger lines, and ideas for playing in your journal. Here are a few general suggestions:

• Freewrite. Gertrude Stein called this "automatic writing." Either on a regular schedule or at frequent intervals, sit down and write without any plan whatsoever of what you are going to write. Write anything that comes into your head. It doesn't matter what it is at all. This is the equivalent of volleying at tennis or improvisation at the piano; it puts you in touch with the instrument and limbers the verbal muscles.
• Focused freewrite. Pick a topic and focus on it. Write for five or ten minutes, saying anything at all about it—anything at all—in any order.
• Brainstorm. Start with the question What if...? Finish the question and then free-associate around it, absolutely anything that pops into your head—ideas, situations, connections, solutions, and images, no matter how bizarre. This is a problem-solving technique that can also generate energy for imaginative writing. If you need an idea, or if your character is facing a decision, or if you don't know what your setting looks like—whatever the problem, whatever idea might be struggling to surface—brainstorm it and let your mind run free.
• Using the world. A journal is not a diary. Your journal may include your own feelings and problems, but training yourself to observe the outside world will help develop the skills of an imaginative writer. Make a daily habit of recording something you experienced or noticed. It may be an overheard remark, an unexpected sight, a person who caught your attention, even a news item or something you learned in a class. Knowing that you are going to write every day will give you a habit of listening and seeing with writing in mind. A writer is a kind of benevolent cannibal who eats the world—or at least one who will experience the world with an eye and ear toward what use can be made of it.

Make a habit, rather than a chore, of writing in your journal. If you skip a day, it's not the end of the world, but it may well be that, with a physical workout, you have to coax or cajole yourself into writing regularly before you get to the point when you look forward to that part of your life, can't wait for it, can't do without it. You will know some of the patterns that help you create a habit. Write first thing in the morning? At the same hour every day? After a shower? With a cup of coffee? Before you fall asleep? Use your self-discipline to make yourself sit down and write, but once you get there, tell your inner critic to hush, give yourself permission to write whatever you please, and play.
TRY THIS 1.2
Here is a list of lists:
• Things on which I am an expert
• Things I have lost
• Signs of winter
• What is inside my body
• Things people have said to me
• What to take on the journey
• Things I have forgotten
• Things to make lists of
Pick any one of these items to generate a list in your journal.
Pick a single word from your list and write a paragraph about it. Is this the germ of a memoir or a story?
Write a single line about each item on the list. Is this the start of a poem?

Journal Excerpts
What follows is a series of snippets, generously offered from the journals of well-established writers, to indicate what a variety of entries a journal might contain. Some of these may be the germ of a story, novel, essay, poem, or play; some may never find their way into a published piece. Some are observations, some are fantasy, some are lists, names, an image, an action, a quotation. Some may suggest a kind of writing you wouldn’t think to include in your own journal. Try it.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Ayelet Waldman
Old graveyard:
Della Floyd
Mehitabel Witham
Joshua Horton
Seth Hewins
Sally Prince Holt
Jonah Fisher
Mehitabel Faulkner
Hepzibah Faulkner “I am ready”
Old man in walker—freckled pate, zipper cardigan, and black shoes two sizes too large. You could fit two fingers between his heel and the back of the shoe. They’re obviously worn, but not at all worn out. He must have bought them years ago, before his body began to shrink. Even his feet are smaller than they were.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Billy Collins
“People think there is no preparation to write poetry. Not like painting, or music. So in my kingdom, you would have to learn to play the trumpet before you were allowed to write a poem.”
Kafka: “The meaning of life is that it will end.”
In America, we cannot seem to get enough of what we don’t need. The mind needs to get used to something better than television, as in music there are “rests” in poetry—obviously at the end of lines and stanzas but anywhere else the poet has sufficient control of cadence to give the reader no option but to pause.
“motives for writing: to continue to speak after you are dead and (from daniel menaker) to win the love of strangers.”
celery salt is an insult to the bloody mary

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Cris Mazza (as a college-student, 19 years old)
But right then another arm-lock on my neck. The back of my chair was between us (I sitting, he standing), but I felt those shoulders over my own.
“I need to beat you up once a day for my only meanness—it’s the only time all day I have physical communication with someone.” Ha Ha.
“Me too.”
That was the real laugh, I mean, he really laughed. I don’t know why. But he said we need each other.

Beauty too intense to be that of a child, too honest to be that of an adult sprawled out like a rag doll someone had thrown up there.
not a crime—a reality

(continued)
I knew how she felt, the way my entrails were fluttering, the way I danced around inside when a slow-moving, slow-talking narrow-eyed man tried it with ME.

Yes, I overheard something. I wasn’t listening though. I was thinking about something else. When his eyes hit, whim—like that—then I was part of it at all right. I knew it. I had to help carry the AV equipment back for that reason.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Patricia Henley

“carry me” = take me

“levee hollers”—is/was this a common term? Did someone’s mama and daddy meet at a levee holler?

Axe Jesus. A bumper sticker.

Jimmy’s grandpa has a jar of coins buried somewhere and a roomful of Elvis memorabilia. Or maybe it’s just music memorabilia.

Lucky was sent to live with Quakers at a boarding school in Pennsylvania when the schools were closed due to de-segregation. Arrangements had been made. She was seven years old. She had a suitcase from the goodwill and a cardboard box of books. She drank whole milk straight from the cow. Her own mother, when she saw her, seemed less and less like where she came from.

FROM THE JOURNAL OF: Philip Graham

There was no anger in her silence, like my father’s; rather, fear. And couldn’t fear be soothed into something else?

Those drawings were how she talked to me, a sign language caught on paper, shadings of her secret self I could spend my life translating.

I’d somehow engineered a strange reversal of personalities.

John Hawkes’s novel Sweet William: the grotesque rendered even more vivid by the elegance of Hawkes’s prose.

the name of a malaria drug, Halfan

He’d twist himself into a little knot, try to coil himself so tight he’d finally feel something besides this damned air floating. But he was never able to squeeze himself into pain; not even a tiny twinge not even a hint of the lightest touch.

(continued)

Most of the dead floated, traveling with the help of their own invisible wind. Only those newly arrived kept walking, an echo of the life they’d so recently lived... No blindness at all but a world alive with scent and touch, antennae exchanging encyclopedic caresses. It was all he’d ever hoped to accomplish in his lifetime: the afterlife was a virtual reality, beyond any technological breakthrough. There was nowhere he couldn’t enter, no person’s secrets he couldn’t uncover.

Those ants pushing and pulling away the smallest pieces of her cracker. But it was hers, and she cried out, but the ants ignored her. She cried out again, now in angry frustration, and began to crawl after them. Her mother scooped her up at her walls, but no soothing could quiet her. She had no words yet to explain to her mother, and the ants escaped.

Following invisible designs inside herself, a picture she drew that I’d never see.

I wanted to bring her back, to have her arrive from wherever she was inside herself and see me at the table, across from her, waiting patiently.

the choppy, swaying gait of goats

He’d always believed that humans were some clever sort of larva, firing off constructs—Stonehenge to the World Trade Center, knife to computer—that were bits of brain. And it was all leading to an artificial intelligence—that wasn’t artificial at all, being a product of brain—that would finally leave the larval stage behind and yet be its apotheosis, its crowning, transcendent glory.

TRY THIS 1.3

Take a notebook with you to any public place and make a list of the proper names you find there (a graveyard, a candy store, a restaurant, a street, a theater...). Write a paragraph of anything at all that these names, or one of them, suggests to you.

TRY THIS 1.4

Listen, alone and intently, to a piece of music you care about. After listening for five or fifteen minutes, write anything the music suggests to you. If it has lyrics, don’t use the words of the song, but the images in your own brain, the words that paint your feeling. Don’t try to make sense, or even sentences; let the music dictate your words.
TRY THIS 1.5
Go back to (or make) your list of “Questions I want answered.” Pick one. Go online and research (on at least four sites) what is known about that question. If it is not an answerable question (“What is the meaning of life?”), you’ll find much more written about it. Make notes in your journal. Then put away the notes and write, quickly, what you seem to have learned, in the form of a poem or a dialogue.

TRY THIS 1.6
Troll the web for sites that cross genres, either within literature or by linking literature with another art: prose poems, motion poems, poem essays, video essays, graphic novels, art songs, texts for dance—any one of those phrases will start a search. Choose a cross-genre form that attracts you, and write about it in your journal.

A word about your workshop …

Many of us think of the primary function of a writing workshop as being to criticize, in order to improve, whatever piece of writing is before us. This is absolutely natural, not only because of the way the writing workshop has evolved over the years but because nothing is more natural than to judge art. We do it all the time, and we do it out of a valid impulse. If you tell me you’ve just seen a movie, I don’t ask the plot; I ask: How was it? Art sets out to affect us emotionally and intellectually, and whether it has achieved this is of the first interest. The poet and critic John Ciardi said of literature that “it is never only about ideas, but about the experience of ideas,” and the first thing we want to know is, naturally, “how was the experience?”

But if the first thing you and your workshop expect is a writer at play, and if in order to play you banish your inner critic and give yourself permission to experiment, doodle, and dance, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to subject that play to immediate assessment. In any case it’s likely that the fragments produced by the exercises in the early chapters of this book will be read aloud rather than reproduced and read in advance. I’m going to suggest that for most of the time this book is being used, you avoid the phrases I like, I don’t like, This works, This doesn’t work—and all their equivalents. It may be harder to forgo praise than blame, but praise should be a controlled substance too. Instead, discipline yourself to explore whatever is in front of you. Not What I like, but What this piece is like. Interrogate it, suggest its context, explore its nature and its possibilities:

- What is the conflict in this situation?
- This reminds me of…
- It’s like…
- I think this character wants…
- What if…?
- The rhythm is…
- Could this be expanded to…?
- The atmosphere seems… and so forth.

This kind of descriptive, inquisitive, and neutral discussion of writing is hard. It will pay off in the freedom that each writer feels to write and in the flexibility of critical response you’re developing in the workshop. In the later part of the course, when everyone is writing in a particular form and revision is the legitimate focus of the work, there will be a time to discuss not only what this piece is trying to do but also where and whether it succeeds. At that point, critique will help. This later critical function of the workshop is discussed further in Chapter 7, “Development and Revision.” Meanwhile keep in mind that even when you arrive at the point that criticism is relevant and helpful, there are a few basic protocols for the workshop that should always be observed:

- It is the obligation of each reader to prepare in advance, focusing on what succeeds in the piece, and where and why, then noting judiciously where improvement is needed and why.
- The piece is under discussion. The author is not. Make sure your comments relate to the nature of the writing and not (even by implication) to the character of the writer. Separate the writer from the voice or character.
- Continue to interrogate the piece: What kind is it? What does it suggest? What is its apparent aim?
- The goal of the workshop is to make this piece the best that it can be. There’s no place for dismissal or disregard. On the contrary, the workshop is there to identify and foster the promise in every story, essay, poem, or drama.
- As the writer, your obligation is to listen attentively, take everything in, and keep your natural defensiveness in check. Your workshop leader may (or may not) offer you a chance to speak. But this is the least important part of the workshop process for you. The most important part comes later, when you get back to work. Then (and only then) you will begin to sort out what’s most useful.
TRY THIS 1.7
Make use of these prompts or trigger lines for easy freewrites. Pick one of them—quickly, don't think about it too much—write it down and keep writing. Anything at all. Whatever the prompt suggests. Keep going. A little bit more.

- This journal is...
- My mother used to have...
- What a jerk. He always...
- The house we lived in...
- In this dream I was...
- She got out of the car...
- The first thing I want in the morning...

MORE TO READ

CHAPTER 2

Image

- Image and Imagination
- Concrete, Significant Details
- Figures of Speech

When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that simmer round the edges...You just let low and let them develop.

*Joan Didion*

WARM-UP
Describe this scene using each of the five senses at least once. Supply the color. Let us see the sea. What sounds do we hear? What smell predominates? What is the texture of the sand or surfboard or water? What does the youth taste? Do your choices create a mood, a judgment, an emotion?
Image and Imagination

There is a simple trick at the heart of imaginative writing.

If I say, “Not everything that appears to be valuable is actually valuable,” you will understand me in a general kind of way, but you won’t think I’ve said anything very interesting (and you might feel a little preached at). Whereas if I say, “All that glistens is not gold,” you literally “see” what I “mean.”

The trick is that if you write in words that evoke the senses—if your language is full of things that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched—you create a world your reader can enter.

Mary Karr begins The Liars Club this way:

My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. He wore a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of hair showed in a V shape on his chest. I had never seen him in anything but a white starched shirt and a gray tie. The change unnerved me. He was pulling at the hem of my favorite nightgown—a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with a ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton. I had tucked my knees under it to make a tent. He could easily have yanked the thing over my head with one motion, but something made him gentle. “Show me the marks,” he said …

We do not know the situation here, but the details—the dark, the mattress, bare floor, the sprouts of hair where a gray tie should be, the knees tucked under the gown, the doctor’s gentle voice—draw us immediately into the situation and make us hungry to know just what this child has suffered. We are “hooked.”

It’s no accident that the words image and imagination have the same root (Latin imago, a picture or portrayal), because what all imaginative writing has in common is that it calls up pictures in the mind. Any sort of writing—reports, treatises, theories, instructions—may be enlivened by examples. But the kinds of writing we group under the heading imaginative—poetry, song lyrics, play scripts, film scripts, personal essays, memoirs, stories, novels—exist fundamentally as re-presentations. They portray people, places, and objects as if physically present. Any particular piece of imaginative writing may or may not be “imaginary” in the sense of being made up; it may or may not have its origins in “real” people or what “really” happened. What all such pieces invariably have in common is that the writing calls up sense impressions in the mind—readers see, hear, smell, taste, and feel the scene by responding through their imaginations.

Novelist Robert Olen Butler points out that all art objects are sensuous and are produced by a process that is sensuous rather than logical. Artists in other media than literature are clear about the nature of their process, because they work with material that is fundamentally of the senses. The musician deals in sound, the painter in color and composition, the sculptor in texture, the dancer in bodily movement. But because as writers we deal in a medium of words, which are abstract symbols, we may find it harder to set logic and argument aside. Writing as an art begins when we surrender ourselves to the world of images.

An image is a word or series of words that evokes one or more of the five senses. An image appeals to the senses. This is the foundation of imaginative writing. If you can “grok” that fact (a useful word that means to understand in the gut as well as the head), you are on your way to being a writer.

Here is a thought that does not contain an image:

It is best to consider consequences before proceeding.

Here is an image that contains the same thought:

Look before you leap.

A thought without an image:

It’s important to reassure your offspring of your affection.

An image that contains the thought:

Have you hugged your child today?

A thought without an image:

The situation is being manipulated by peripheral interests.

An image that contains the thought:

Wag the dog.

A thought without an image:

I will do everything in my power to overturn this unjust verdict.

An image that contains the thought:

I will fall like an ocean on that court! (Arthur Miller, The Crucible)

A thought without an image:

The verses I am writing have no vitality; they are unattractive and stale.

An image that contains the thought:

They are not pigs, they are not even fish. / Though they have a piggy and a fishy air—(Sylvia Plath, “Stillborn”)

Notice that every case of flat writing above is full of abstractions (actually, affection, power, vitality, before), generalizations (everything, all,
consequences, versus), and judgments (valuable, important, best, unjust, no vitality, unattractive, stale). When these are replaced with nouns that call up a sense image (gold, child, dog, ocean, court, pigs, fish) and with verbs that represent actions we can visualize (glisten, look, leap, hug, wag, fall), the writing comes alive. At the same time, the ideas, generalizations, and judgments are also present in the images.

Notice too that Miller’s image “fall like an ocean” has weight and texture; Plath’s image of poems that have a “fishy air” suggests not just the sight of a fish but its smell. All of the five senses go into the making of imagery, and a writer working at full stretch will make use of them all.

It’s not that abstractions, generalizations, and judgments are useless or bad writing in themselves; on the contrary, they are important to all human communication.

- **Abstractions** are the names of ideas or concepts, which cannot in themselves be experienced directly through one or more of our senses, such as intelligence, criticism, love, anger.
- **Generalizations** can only be vaguely visualized because they include too many of a given group: something, creatures, kitchen equipment.
- **Judgments** tell us what to think about something instead of showing it: beautiful, insidious, suspiciously.

Human beings are able to communicate largely because they are capable of these kinds of conceptual thinking.

But it is sense impressions that make writing vivid, and there is a physiological reason for this. Information taken in through the five senses is processed in the limbic system of the brain, which generates sensory responses in the body: heart rate, blood/oxygen flow, muscle reaction, and so forth. Emotional response consists of these physiological reactions, so in order to have an effect on your reader’s emotions, you must literally get into the limbic system, which you can do through the senses. Now, the images of a film strike the eye directly, as images, just as the sounds of music strike the ear directly as sound, the smells of perfume or food strike the nose directly, and so forth. But the images of written literature (including sound, smell, taste, feel) strike the eye as little symbols on the page, which must be translated by the brain into the sound that these symbols represent, which must then be translated into the sense that our language signifies by that particular sound. It’s a complicated process that demands a lot of a reader, who will thank you for making it worthwhile.

It is a dynamic process, to which readers actively bring their own memories and experience. Words not only denote, or literally refer to their meaning, but connote, suggest or imply through layers of connection in our experience and culture. Often, using the imagery of one sense will suggest the other senses as well and will resonate with ideas, qualities, and emotions that are not stated. Strong images tend to demand active verbs that make for energy in the prose or the poetic line.

Here is a single sentence from Margaret Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*, in which the heroine describes the zoology building where her father worked when she was a child.

*The cellar smells strongly of mouse droppings, a smell which wafts upward through the whole building, getting fainter as you go up, mingling with the smell of green Dustbane used to clean the floors, and with the other smells, the floor polish and furniture wax and formaldehyde and snakes.*

We are ostensibly given only a series of smells from a child’s point of view, but as those smells rise we experience traveling upward through the building, also seeing the floors, the furniture, the snakes. The “rising” smells also help build the suggestion of the sinister, from mouse to Dustbane to formaldehyde to snakes. There is an echo of fear implied in “getting fainter as you go up,” which seems to apply to courage as well as smells.

Notice also how the passage bristles with active verbs. These smells don’t just lie there, they waft, get fainter, mingle; you go; the Dustbane is used to clean. This is important. Active verbs are images too. “Look before you leap” contains no visible objects, but we can see the actions. Passive verbs, linking verbs, all forms of the verb to be, invite flat, generalized writing, whereas active verbs jump-start the mind.

**TRY THIS 2.1**

Open a textbook, a how-to book, a form letter, something not intended to be a work of the imagination. Identify words that represent abstractions, generalizations, and/or judgments. Make a list of at least ten of these. Pick two or three of them and invent an image that suggests each word. Let your imagination loose—this is a sense impression, not a definition! Examples:

**Capitalism**
Dotted line across Nevada
Rollerblade straight.
Sign here.

**Shame**
Okra in the gumbo.
One cross-section surfaces:
Perfect flower,
Pool of slime.

Or this succinct example from Barbara Drake:

**Hunger**
How terrible—from little blob of jelly has a mouth.
Concrete, Significant Details

The greatest writers are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. 

William Strunk, Jr.

Writers are frequently advised: *show, don’t tell.* What this means is that it is crucial to address the senses. Vivid writing contains concrete, significant details.

- **Concrete** means that there is an image, something that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched.
- **Significant** means that the specific image also suggests an abstraction, generalization, or judgment.
- **Detail** means that there is a degree of focus and specificity.

The notion of detail is important to the image because it moves away from the generalized and toward the particular. For example, creature is a generalized notion, hard to see except in the vaguest way. Animal is still vague; four-legged animal is a little more specific; domestic animal a little more; dog narrows the field; mixed-breed Shepherd we can see; old Sammy asleep on the red rug, his haunches twitching in his dream brings the dog into sharp focus in our minds. At the same time this last sentence resonates with the ideas of age and uneasy sleep. If it said *his teeth bared and gnashing in his dream,* we’d also guess that old Sam has a capacity for meanness. Notice how the narrowing specificity of the noun invites active verbs.

TRY THIS 2.2

Begin with the largest general category you can think of—minerals, food, structures—think big. Then narrow the category step by step, becoming more specific until you have a single detailed image. Try it again with the same large category but narrow in another direction. Can you, without naming a quality, make your image suggest an idea or direct our attitude toward the thing you describe?

If specificity as well as concreteness is crucial to vivid writing, so too is the significance carried in those concrete details; the ideas or qualities that they suggest; the way they reveal character, attract, or warn us; the way they lead us to think and feel. A list of physical details without such hints will not move us: *The lawn is green; there are four trees; there is a white picket fence about three feet high and a flagstone walk leading up to the white door.* We want to have our intellects and emotions also directed toward the meaning of the details.

A survey of any bookshelf will turn up dozens of examples of this principle. Here, for instance, is a scene from Anne Tyler’s *Accidental Tourist.* The protagonist’s wife has left him and he is having trouble sleeping.

The dog, sighing, roused himself and dropped off the bed to pad downstairs behind him. The floorboards were cool underfoot, the kitchen linoleum cooler still; there was a glow from the refrigerator as Macon poured himself a glass of milk. He went to the living room and turned on the TV. Generally some black-and-white movie was running—men in suits and felt hats, women with padded shoulders. He didn’t try to follow the plot. He took small, steady sips of milk, feeling the calcium traveling to his bones. Hadn’t he read that calcium cures insomnia? He absently stroked the cat, who had somehow crept into his lap. It was much too hot to have a cat in his lap, especially this one—a loose-strung, gray-tweed female who seemed made of some unusually dense substance. And the dog, most often, would be lying on top of his feet. “It’s just you and me, old buddy,” Macon would tell them. The cat made a commotion of sweat across his bare thighs.

In this passage, Tyler makes continual reference to the senses, letting us feel the floor, the cat, and the heat; see the glow of the refrigerator and the TV; taste the milk and the “calcium traveling to his bones”; hear the dog sigh and the man talking to the animals. The writing is alive because we do in fact live through our sense perceptions, and Tyler takes us past words and through thought to let us perceive the scene in this way.

At the same time, a number of ideas not stated reverberate off the images. We are aware of generalizations the author does not need to make because we will make them ourselves. Tyler could have had her character “tell” us: *The house felt eerie. I was desperately lonely and neither the television nor the animals were really company. I thought if I did something sensible and steady it would help, but I just felt trapped.* *When I tried to be cheerful it got worse.* This version would be very flat, and none of it is necessary. The eeriness is inherent in the light of the refrigerator and TV; the loneliness in the sigh, the sips, and the absent stroking of the cat. The sense of entrapment is in the cat on his thighs and the dog on his feet. The emotion of the paragraph begins with a sigh and ends in sweat. Notice how deftly Tyler tells us—“men in suits and felt hats, women with padded shoulders”—that at this late hour, all there is on TV is film noir, which adds a connotation of further eeriness, seediness, and despair.

John Gardner, in The Art of Fiction, speaks of concrete details as “proofs,” which establish in the reader such firm confidence that the author is an authority, that we will believe whatever she or he tells us. An author who is vague and opinionated, on the other hand, makes us uneasy and suspicious.
And this applies to characters as well—a fact you can exploit. Any character—whether in a memoir, a fiction, poetry, or drama—who speaks in generalizations and judgments will undermine our trust.

It is odd but I must tell you that I have never felt so self-assured, so splendid, so brilliant... Apparently, it is necessary to find someone completely inferior to appreciate one's own excellence. To be a prince in name is nothing. To be a prince in essence—it's heaven, it's pure joy.

Ivona, Princess of Burgundia, Witold Gombrowicz

We don't have to know anything about this character or the play he comes from to know that we mistrust his judgment. This book has begun by insisting on imagery because it is so central to literature and also because many beginning writers try to make their, or their characters', emotions felt by merely naming them, and so fail to let us experience those emotions. Here is a passage from a young writer, which fails through lack of appeal to the senses.

Debbie was a very stubborn and completely independent person and was always doing things her way despite her parents' efforts to get her to conform. Her father was an executive in a dress manufacturing company and was able to afford his family all the luxuries and comforts of life. But Debbie was completely indifferent to her father's affluence.

This passage contains a number of judgments we might or might not share with the author, and she has not convinced us that we do. What constitutes stubbornness? Independence? Indifference? Affluence? Further, since the judgments are supported by generalizations, we have no sense of the individuality of the characters, which alone would bring them to life on the page. What things was she always doing? What efforts did her parents make to get her to conform? What sort of executive is the father? What dress manufacturing company? What luxuries and comforts?

Debbie would wear a tank top to a tea party if she pleased, with fluorescent earrings and ankle-strap sandals.

"Oh, sweetheart," Mrs. Chiddister would stand in the doorway wringing her hands. "It's not nice."

"Not what?" Debbie would say, and add a fringed belt.

Mr. Chiddister was Artistic Director of the Boston branch of Cardin, and had a high respect for what he called "elegant textures," which ranged from handwoven tweed to gold filigree, and which he willingly offered his daughter. Debbie preferred her laminated bangles.

We have not passed a final judgment on the merits of these characters, but we know a good deal more about them, and we have drawn certain interim conclusions that are our own and have not been forced on us by the author. Debbie is independent of her parents' values, rather careless of their feelings, energetic, a little trashy. Mrs. Chiddister is quite ineffectual. Mr. Chiddister is a snob, though maybe Debbie's taste is so bad we'll end up on his side.

But maybe that isn't at all what the author had in mind. The point is that we weren't allowed to know what the author did have in mind. Perhaps it was more like this version.

One day Debbie brought home a copy of Ulysses. Mrs. Strum called it "filthy" and threw it across the sunporch. Debbie knelt on the parquet and retrieved her bookmark, which she replaced. "No, it's not," she said.

"You're not so old I can't take a strap to you!" Mr. Strum reminded her.

Mr. Strum was controlling stockholder of Readywear Conglomerates, and was proud of treating his family, not only on his salary, but also on his expense account. The summer before he had taken them to Belgium, where they toured the American Cemetery and the torture chambers of Ghent Castle. Entirely ungrateful, Debbie had spent the rest of the trip curled up in the hotel with a shabby copy of some poems.

Now we have a much clearer understanding of stubbornness, independence, indifference, and affluence—both their natures and the value we are to place on them. This time our judgment is heavily weighted in Debbie's favor, partly because people who read books have a sentimental sympathy with other people who read books, but also because we hear hysteria in "filthy" and "take a strap to you," whereas Debbie's resistance is quiet and strong. Mr. Strum's attitude toward his expense account suggests that he's corrupt, and his choice of "luxuries" is morbid. The passage does contain two overt judgments, the first being that Debbie was "entirely ungrateful." Notice that by the time we get to this, we're aware that the judgment is Mr. Strum's and that Debbie has little enough to be grateful for. We understand not only what the author says but also that she means the opposite of what she says, and we feel doubly clever to get it; that is the pleasure of irony. Likewise, the judgment that the book of poems is "shabby" shows Mr. Strum's crass materialism toward what we know to be the finer things.

TRY THIS 2.3
Pick a vivid passage of fiction or creative nonfiction and spoil it by replacing specific details with generalizations and judgments. Exchange with a person who has similarly spoiled a favorite passage. Create a new and different passage by replacing the generalizations and judgments with your own choice of sensory details. Compare the results.
TRY THIS 2.4
Write down a bumper sticker you like. (It’s a good idea to exchange with someone else so you are working with one you don’t actually remember.) Describe the car (van, truck, SUV) this bumper sticker is stuck on—make, model, year, color, condition. Open the door. Describe the smells and textures. Name three objects you find. Name a fourth object you’re surprised to find there. Look up. Here comes the owner. Who, walking how, wearing what, carrying what, with what facial expression? The owner says something. What?

Figures of Speech

A metaphor goes out and comes back; it is a fetching motion of the imagination.

Tony Hoagland

English is a language unusually rich in tropes, or figures of speech—that is, expressions not meant to be taken literally but as standing for something related in some way (the word trope comes from a Greek word meaning to twist or turn). Tropes almost invariably involve an image. The number and variety of common figures of speech make English difficult to learn as a foreign language, but also make it fertile ground for creative writing. (Notice that fertile ground here is a trope, specifically a metaphor in which the language is compared to soil.)

There are many different kinds of figures of speech, but the five major tropes are usually considered to be:

- **Metonymy**, in which one thing is represented by another thing associated with it, as in all the crowns of Europe (where crowns stands for kings)
- **Synecdoche**, in which a part stands for the whole, as in all hands on deck (where hands stands for men)
- **Personification**, in which human characteristics are bestowed on anything nonhuman, as in the breathing city or the gentle breeze
- **Metaphor**, a comparison as in the woman is a rose
- **Simile**, a comparison as in the woman is like a rose

Though these are five of the most frequently used figures of speech in English, you may be familiar with others, such as **hyperbole**, which is extreme exaggeration, and **oxymoron**, which links two contradictory words. And who hasn’t enjoyed groaning at a **pun**? In medieval and Renaissance rhetoric, dozens of such tropes were identified, classified, and debated, and skill in using these “ornaments” much admired.

The rhetorical debate has lost its urgency, but the use of figurative language in literature retains its force, slightly turning or twisting the reader’s perspective to offer a new or unusual view of the familiar. When Todd McEwen—in the memoir of his sister, “A Very Young Dancer”—says that her suitor, “Jay, suddenly tired of Moira’s perpetual mystery, announced, The wallet is closed,” he (and Jay) are using a metonymy in which the wallet stands for love and indulgence. If a fictional narrator observes, “Rub two guilts together and they burst into blame,” she is personifying the abstractions guilt and blame with ironic reference to the notion of rubbing sticks together. If a poem begins:

I keep stepping on the ugly nap
Of all our local comings and disappearings…

The “nap” is a synecdoche for the more obvious word carpet, and moves our focus inward, toward a detail or close-up. It is said of filmmaking that “every close-up is synecdoche,” meaning that when, for example, we see a close-up of a hand, we assume that it stands for the whole person. If we see that hand go limp, it may be metonymy suggesting that person’s death.

Of all the possible figures of speech to be used by the poet, the playwright, the essayist, and the story writer, metaphor and simile are the most common and the most crucial. A metaphor assumes or states a comparison, without acknowledging that it is a comparison: my electric muscles shock the crowd; her hair is seaweed and she is the sea. The metaphor may come in the form of an adjective: they have a piggy and a fishy air. Or it may come as a verb: the bees shouldering the grass.

A simile makes a comparison between two things using the words like or as: his teeth rattled like dice in a box; my head is light as a balloon; I will fall like an ocean on that court!

Both metaphor and simile compare things that are both alike and different, and it is in the tension between this likeness and difference that their literary power lies.

From earliest infancy, our brains are busy registering likeness and difference. This is a major way we learn, about both behavior and what things mean. A smile on Mother’s face expresses and promises pleasure, so a smile on a different face also reassures us. If we fall and are told to “be careful,” then “be careful” will suggest alarm when we reach for the glass of milk. We compare an experience in the past to a current problem in order to predict the future. The habit of comparison is so natural that our language is full of metaphor and simile; we use without knowing we are doing so. Don’t split a gut. Let’s go for all the marbles. It doesn’t compute. That went belly up. He lays it on with a trovel. I’m fed to the teeth. Read my lips. Many popular metaphors, such as these, are reused until they become clichés, comparisons that have lost their freshness.

Metaphor is central to imaginative writing because it offers a particularly exact and resonant kind of concrete detail. When we speak of “the eyes of
...a potato," or "the eye of the needle," we mean simply that the leaf bud and the thread hole look like eyes. We don't mean to suggest that the potato or the needle can see. The comparisons do not suggest any essential or abstract quality to do with sight.

But in literature both metaphor and simile have developed so that the resonance of comparison is precisely in the essential or abstract quality that the two objects share. When a writer speaks of "the eyes of the houses" or "the windows of the soul," the comparison of eyes to windows does contain the idea of transmitting vision between the inner and the outer. When Shakespeare's Jacques claims that "all the world's a stage," the significance lies not in the physical similarity of the world to a stage (he isn't backtracking in history to claim the world is flat) but in the essential qualities that such similarity implies: the pretense of the actors, the briefness of the play, the parts that men and women must inevitably play from babyhood to old age.

A metaphor presents us with a comparison that also conveys an abstraction or a judgment. A good metaphor resonates with the essential, and this is the writer's principle of choice. So Peter Hoeg, in *Smilla's Sense of Snow*, speaks of rain showers that "slap me in the face with a wet towel." Well, rain showers can pitter gently on your face, or dribble down your neck, or bring May flowers. But the rain showers that Hoeg is talking about have a vicious nature that lies in the metaphor: They hit hard, they sting, and they seem to hurt on purpose.

Hoeg's metaphor contains a complex of meanings; yet it is brief. Because a metaphor condenses so many connotations into the tension between the images, it tends to be not only concrete but concise. So although you might in one context choose to say, "He was so angry that I thought he was going to hit me," if you sense that the moment wants the special intensity of metaphor, you could also pack that meaning into "His face was a fist."

A metaphor is a particular and particularly imaginative kind of significant detail comparing two sensible images and letting the abstraction remain unvoiced between them. But even if part of the comparison is an abstraction, that part will be made vivid by the "thingness" of the comparison. Robert Frost's famous "Fire and Ice" develops a simple but striking metaphor in which the objects are compared to the qualities themselves:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

**TRY THIS 2.5**

Write this poem: The first line consists of an abstraction, plus a verb, plus a place. The second line describes attire. The third line summarizes an action. Let it flow; don't worry too much about making sense.

**Examples (by Carissa Neff)**

Beauty creeps out the window
Wearing nothing but taut bare skin.
Leaving a trail of wrinkles behind her.

Hunger yells in the hallway,
Draped in cymbals;
He stamps and shouts, "Hear me now!"

The major danger of metaphor is cliché. Those "windows of the soul," those "eyes like pools" are so familiar that they no longer hold any interest, whereas a fresh metaphor surprises us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the aptness or truth of the likeness. A clichéd metaphor fails to surprise us and so fails to illuminate. Sometimes as a writer you will find yourself with a gift of fresh comparison, and sometimes the first image that comes to mind will be tired and stale. All writers experience this, and the good ones learn to overcome it. The first thing to do is to make yourself alert to clichés in your own writing and the world around you, and then to labor (which may mean to dream) your way toward those images that illuminate the everyday and make the familiar strange.

**TRY THIS 2.6**

Quickly list as many clichéd metaphors as you can think of: *the path of life, eyes like pools, crazy as a bedbug, nose to the grindstone*, and so forth. Then switch half a dozen of the comparisons: *eyes like bedbugs, nose to the path, the grindstone of life*. Some of these might be fresh and apt! In any case, the exercise will help you become aware of clichés and so help you avoid them.

My own long relationship with cliché is a paradox, for I find that my language is least fresh when I am most determined to write well. If I sit rigid with good intentions, my inner critic takes up residence on my shoulder, sneering *that's silly, that's far-fetched, what a crock, nobody'll believe that!*—with the result that I fall back on usual phrases. But if I knock her off her perch and let myself try anything that comes to mind, *some of it will be silly, some far-fetched, and among the verbal rubble there is almost bound to be a salvageable building block, a serviceable cooking pot, a precious stone.*

**MORE TO READ**

I gaped bewildered, appalled. An oval shadow hung in the water behind the drained frog; then the shadow glided away. The frog skin bag started to sink.

I had read about the giant water bug, but never seen one. "Giant water bug" is really the name of the creature, which is an enormous, heavy-bodied brown beetle. It eats insects, tadpoles, fish, and frogs. Its grasping forelegs are mighty and hooked inward. It seizes a victim with these legs, hugs it tight, and paralyzes it with enzymes injected during a vicious bite. That one bite is the only bite it ever takes. Through the puncture shoot the poisons that dissolve the victim's muscles and bones and organs—all but the skin—and through it the giant water bug sucks out the victim's body, reduced to a juice. This event is quite common in warm fresh water. The frog I saw was being sucked by a giant water bug. I had been kneeling on the island grass; when the unrecognizable flap of frog skin settled on the creek bottom, swaying, I stood up and brushed the knees of my pants. I couldn't catch my breath.

DAVID SEDARIS

Standing By

It was one of those headaches that befall every airline passenger. A flight is delayed because of thunderstorms or backed-up traffic—or maybe it's cancelled altogether. Maybe you board two hours late, or maybe you board on time, and spend the next two hours sitting on the runway. When it happens to you, it's a national tragedy—why aren't the papers reporting this, you wonder.

Only when it happens to someone else do you realize what a dull story it really is. "They told us we'd leave at three instead of two-thirty, so I went to get a frosted-pecan wrap, and when I came back they changed the time to four, on account of the plane we'd be riding on hadn't left Pittsburgh yet. Then I was, like, 'Why didn't you tell us that an hour ago?,' and they were, like, 'Ma'am, just stand away from the counter, please.'"

Because I'm in the air so often, I hear this sort of thing a lot. In line for a coffee. In line for a newspaper or a gumpowder test on the handle of my public-radio tote bag: everywhere I go, someone in an eight-dollar T-shirt is whipping out a cell phone and delivering the fine print of his or her delay. One can't help but listen in, but then my focus shifts and I find myself staring. I should be used to the way Americans dress when travelling, yet still it manages to amaze me. It's as if the person next to you had been washing shoe polish off a pig, then suddenly threw down his sponge, saying, "Fuck this. I'm going to Los Angeles!"

On Halloween, when I see the ticket agents dressed as hags and mummies, I no longer think, Nice costume, but, Now we have to tag our own luggage?

I mean that I mistake them for us.
The scariness, of course, cuts both ways. I was on a plane in the spring of 2003 when the flight attendant asked us to pray for our troops in Iraq. It was a prickly time, but, brand-new war or no brand-new war, you don’t ever want to hear the word “pray” from a flight attendant.

You don’t want to hear the phrase “I’ll be right back,” either. That’s code for “Go fuck yourself,” according to a woman who used to fly for Northwest and taught me several terms specific to her profession.

“You know how a plastic bottle of water will get all cranky during a flight?” she asked. “Well, it happens to people, too, to our insides. That’s why we get all gassy.”

“All right,” I said.

“So what me and the other gals would sometimes do is fart while we walked up and down the aisle. No one could hear it on account of the engine noise, but, anyway, that’s what we called ‘crop dusting.’”

When I asked another flight attendant, this one male, how he dealt with a plane full of belligerent passengers, he said, “Oh, we have our ways. The next time you’re flying and it comes time to land, listen closely as we make our final pass down the aisle.”

In the summer of 2009, I was trying to get from North Dakota to Oregon. There were thunderstorms in Colorado, so we were two hours late leaving Fargo. This caused me to miss my connecting flight, and upon my arrival in Denver I was directed to the customer-service line. It was a long one—thirty, maybe thirty-five people, all of them cranky and exhausted. In front of me stood a woman in her mid-seventies, accompanying two beautifully dressed children, a boy and a girl. “The airlines complain that nobody’s travelling, and then you arrive to find your flight’s been oversold!” the woman griped. “I’m trying to get me and my grand-kids to San Francisco, and now they’re telling us there’s nothing until tomorrow afternoon.”

At this, her cell phone rang. The woman raised it to her ear and a great many silver bracelets clattered down her arm. “Frank? Is that you? What did you find out?”

The person on the other end fed her information, and as she struggled to open her pocketbook I held out my pad and pen. “A nice young man just gave me something to write with, so go ahead,” the woman said. “I’m ready.” Then she said, “What? Well, I could have told you that.” She handed me back my pad and pen, and, rolling her eyes, whispered, “Thanks anyway.” After hanging up, she turned to the kids, “Your old grandmother is so sorry for putting you through this. But she’s going to make it up to you, she swears.”

They were like children from a catalogue. The little girl’s skirt was a red-and-white check, and matched the ribbon that banded her straw hat. Her brother was wearing a shirt and tie. It was a clip-on, but, still, it made him and his sister the best-dressed people in line, much better than the family ten or so places ahead of them. That group consisted of a couple in their mid-fifties and three teen-agers, two of whom were obviously brothers. The third teen-ager, a girl, was holding a very young baby. I suppose it could have been a loaner, but the way she engaged with it—the obvious pride and pleasure she was radiating—led me to believe that the child was hers. Its father, I guessed, was the kid standing next to her, the taller and more visually dynamic of the brothers. The young man’s hair was almost orange, and drooped from his head in thin, lank braids. At the end of each one, just above the rubber band, was a colored bead the size of a marble. Stevie Wonder wore his hair like that in the late seventies, but he’s black. And blind. Then, too, Stevie Wonder didn’t have acne on his neck, and wear baggy denim shorts that fell midway between his knees and his ankles. Topping it off was the kid’s T-shirt. I couldn’t see the front of it, but printed in large letters across the back were the words “Freaky Mothafoca.”

I didn’t know where to start with that one. Let’s see, I’m flying on a plane with my parents and my infant son, so should I wear the T-shirt that says “Orgasm Donor,” “I’m No Gynecologist but I’m Willing to Take a Look,” or, no, seeing as I’ll have the beaded cornrows, I think I should go with “Freaky Mothafoca.”

As the kid reached over and took the baby from the teen-age girl, the woman in front of me winced. “Typical,” she groaned.

“I beg your pardon.”

She gestured toward the Freaky Mothafoca. “The only ones having babies are the ones who shouldn’t be having them.” Her gaze shifted to the adults. “And look at the stupid grandparents, proud as punch.”

It was one of those situations I often find myself in while travelling. Something’s said by a stranger I’ve been randomly thrown into contact with, and I want to say, “Listen. I’m with you on most of this, but before we continue I need to know whom you voted for in the last election.”

If the grandmother’s criticism was coming from the same place as mine, if she was just being petty and judgmental, we could go on all day, perhaps even form a friendship. If, on the other hand, it was tied to a conservative agenda, I was going to have to switch tracks, and side with the Freaky Mothafoca, who was, after all, just a kid. He may have looked like a Dr. Seuss character, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t love his baby—a baby, I told myself, who just might grow up to be a Supreme Court Justice, or the President of the United States. Or, at least, I don’t know, someone with a job.

Of course; you can’t just ask people whom they voted for. Sometimes you can tell by looking, but the grandmother with the many bracelets could have gone either way. In the end, I decided to walk the center line. “What gets me is that they couldn’t even spell ‘motherfucker’ right,” I whispered. “I mean, what kind of example is that setting for our young people?”
After that, she didn’t want to talk anymore, not even when the line
advanced, and Mothafocka and company moved to one of the counter
positions. Including the baby, there were six in their party, so I knew it was
taking forever. Where do they need to go, anyway? I asked myself. Wherever
it is, would it have killed them to drive?

Fly enough, and you learn to go braindead when you have to. It’s sort of like
time travel. One minute you’re bending to unlace your shoes, and the next
thing you know you’re paying fourteen dollars for a fruit cup, wondering,
How did I get here?

No sooner had I alienated the grandmother in Denver than I was
trapped by the man behind me, who caught my eye and, without invitation,
proceeded to complain. He had been passed over for a standby seat earlier
that morning and was not happy about it. “The gal at the gate said she’d call
my name when it came time to board, but, hell, she didn’t call me.”

I tried to look sympathetic.

“I should have taken her name,” the man continued. “I should have
reported her. Hell, I should have punched her up what I should have done!”

“I hear you,” I said.

Directly behind him was a bald guy with a silver mustache, one of those
closeted jobs which wanders awhile before eventually morphing into sideburns.
The thing was as curved and bushy as a squirrel’s tail, and the man shook
from it as the fellow who’d lost his standby seat turned to engage him.

“Goddam airline. It’s no wonder they’re all going down the toilet.”

“None of them want to work, that’s the problem,” the bald man with
the mustache said. “All any of them care about is their next goddam coffee break.”
He looked at the counter agents with disdain, and then turned his eye on the
Freaky Mothafocka. “And that one must be heading back to the circus.”

“Pathetic,” the man behind me said. He himself was wearing pleated
khaki shorts and a blue T-shirt. A baseball cap hung from his waistband,
and his sneakers, which were white, appeared to be brand new. Like a lot of men
you see these days, he looked like a boy, suddenly, shockingly, set into an
adult body. “We get a kid looks like him back in the town I come from, and
every time I see him I just think God he isn’t mine.”

As the two started in on rap music and baggy trousers, I zoned out, and
thought about my last layover in Denver. I was on the people mover, jogging
toward my connection at the end of Concourse C, when the voice over the
P.A. system asked Adolf Hitler to pick up a white courtesy phone. Did I hear
that correctly? I remember thinking. It’s hard to imagine anyone calling their
son Adolf Hitler, so the person must have changed it from something less
provocative, a category that includes pretty much everything. Weider still
was hearing the name in the same sentence as the word “courtesy.” I imag-
ined a man picking up the receiver, his voice made soft by surprise, and the
possibility of bad news. “Yes, hello, this is Adolf Hitler.”

Thinking of it made me laugh, and that brought me back to the present,
and the fellow behind me in the khaki shorts. “Isn’t it amazing how quickly
one man can completely screw up a country,” he was saying.

“You got that right,” Mr. Mustache agreed. “It’s a goddam mess is what it is.”

I assumed they were talking about George Bush but gradually realized
it was Barack Obama, who had, at that point, been in office for less than
six months.

The man with the mustache mentioned a G.M. dealership in his home
town. “They were doing fine, but now the federal government’s telling them
they have to close. Like this is Russia or something, a Communist country!”

The man in the khaki shorts joined in, and I wished I’d paid closer
attention to the auto-baiting stuff. It had been on the radio and in all the
papers, but because I don’t drive, and I always thought that car dealerships
were ugly, I’d either turned the page or let my mind wander, which was
unfortunate, as I’d have loved to have turned around and seen those two
what for. Then again, even if I were informed, what’s the likelihood of chang-
ing anyone’s opinion, especially a couple of strangers? If my own little mind
is muddled, why wouldn’t theirs be?

“We’ve got to take our country back,” the man with the mustache said.
“Tha’s the long and short of it, and if votes won’t do the trick then maybe
we need to use force.”

What struck me with him, and with many of the conservatives I’d heard
since the election, was his overblown, almost egocentric take on politi-
cal outrage, his certainty that no one else had quite experienced it before.
What, then, had I felt during the Bush-Cheney years? Was that somehow
secondary? “Don’t tell me I don’t know how to hate,” I wanted to say. Then
I stopped and asked myself, Do you really want that to be your message?
Think you can out-hate me, asshole? I was fucking hateing people before you were
even born!

We’re forever blaming the airline industry for turning us into monsters:
it’s the fault of the ticket agents, the baggage handlers, the slowpokes at the
newstands and the fast-food restaurants. But what if this is who we truly
are, and the airport’s just a forum that allows us to be our real selves, not just
hateful but gloriously so?

Would Adolf Hitler please meet his party at Baggage Claim 4. Repeat, Adolf
Hitler can meet his party at Baggage Claim 4.

It’s a depressing thought, and one that proved hard to shake. It was with
me when I boarded my flight to Portland and it was still on my mind several
hours later, when we were told to put our tray tables away and prepare for
landing. Then the flight attendants, garbage bags in hand, gided down the
aisle, looking each one of us square in the face and whispering, without
discrimination, “Your trash. You’re trash. Your family’s trash.”
TRY THIS 2.7
Write quickly a page or two about a bad travel experience you have had. Make yourself a part of the problem (through the way you look, talk, smell...).

FICTION

TOBIAS WOLFF

Bullet in the Brain

Anders couldn’t get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders—a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a “POSITION CLOSED” sign in her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation and watched the teller with hatred. “Oh, that’s nice,” one of them said. She turned to Anders and added, confident of his accord, “One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for more.”

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the presumptuous crybaby in front of him. “Damed unfair,” he said, “Tragic, really. If they’re not chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they’re closing their positions.”

She stood her ground. “I didn’t say it was tragic,” she said, “I just think it’s a pretty lousy way to treat your customers.”

“And you,” Anders said. “Heaven will take note.”

She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing, and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol pressed against the guard’s neck. The guard’s eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The other man had a sawed-off shotgun. “Keep your big mouth shut!” the man with the pistol said, though no one had spoken a word. “One of you tells the alarm, you’re all dead meat. Got it?”

The tellers nodded.

“Oh, bravo,” Anders said. “Dead meat.” He turned to the woman in front of him. “Great script, eh? The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes.”

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed the shotgun to his partner and yanked the guard’s wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs. He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. “Buzz him in,” his partner said. The man with the shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a hefty bag. When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, “Whose slot is that?”

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her throat and turned to the man she’d been talking to. He nodded. “Mine,” she said.

“Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag.”

“Where you go,” Anders said to the woman in front of him. “Justice is done.”

“Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you to talk?”

“No,” Anders said.

“Then shut your trap.”

“Did you hear that?” Anders said. “‘Bright boy.’ Right out of The Killers.”

“Please be quiet,” the woman said.

“Hey, you deaf or what?” The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon into Anders’ gut. “You think I’m playing games?”

“No,” Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He did this by making himself stare into the man’s eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in the mask: pale blue and rawly red-rimmed. The man’s left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

“You like me, bright boy?” he said. “You want to suck my dick?”

“No,” Anders said.

“Then stop looking at me.”

Anders fixed his gaze on the man’s shiny wing-tip shoes.

“Not down there. Up there.” He stuck the pistol under Anders’ chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers’ cages. The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter’s work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the utmost gravity. The artist had a
few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again—a certain rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders’ eye was Zeus and Europa—portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had tilted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there’d been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, “Hubba hubba.”

“What’s so funny, bright boy?”

“Oh nothing.”

“You think I’m comical? You think I’m some kind of clown?”

“No.”

“You think you can fuck with me?”

“No.”

“Fuck with me again, you’re history. Capiche?”

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, “Capiche—oh, God, capiche,” and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders’ skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of iron transports and neuro-transmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar pattern, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lightning that flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, “passed before his eyes.”

It is worth noting what Anders did not remember, given what he did remember. He did not remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to irritate him—her unembarrassed carnality, and especially the cordial way she had with his unit, which she called Mr. Mole, as in, “Uh-oh, looks like Mr. Mole wants to play,” and, “Let’s hide Mr. Mole!” Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not remember standing just outside his daughter’s door as she lectured her about his naughtiness and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways. He did not remember a single line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his youth so that he could give himself the shivers at will—not “Silent, upon a peak in Darien,” or “My God, I heard this day,” or “All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-little! All?” None of these did he remember; not one. Anders did not remember his dying mother saying of his father, “I should have stabbed him in his sleep.”

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not remember the surprise of seeing a college classmate’s name on the jacket of a novel not long after they graduated, or the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not remember the pleasure of giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own just days after his daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, “Lord have mercy!” He did not remember deliberately crashing his father’s car into a tree, or having his ribs kicked in by three policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up with laughter. He did not remember when he began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all summer, and it has become tedious to Anders; an oppression, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. Anders has never met Coyle’s cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further notice of him until they’ve chosen sides and someone asks the cousin what position he wants to play. “Shortstop,” the boy says. “Short’s the best position they is.” Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle’s cousin repeat what he’s just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he’s being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all—it’s that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won’t be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet’s tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can’t be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, They is, they is, they is.
TRY THIS 2.8
Describe someone entirely in negatives: what he or she does not do, does not look like, does not remember; how he or she does not dress, walk, sound, or the like. Can you make us know who the character is?

JAMAICA KINCAID

Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barefoot in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little clothes right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn’t have gum on it, because that way it won’t hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school; always eat your food in such a way that it won’t turn someone else’s stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; but I don’t sing benna on Sundays and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease; this is how you iron your father’s khaki pants so that they don’t have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don’t like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don’t squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don’t pick people’s flowers—you might catch something; don’t throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don’t like, and that way something bad won’t fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn’t work there are other ways, and if they don’t work don’t feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn’t fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh; but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread? you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?

TRY THIS 2.9
Let one character scold another with a list of specific complaints.

POEMS

ROGER BONAIR-AGARD

American History looks for light—a prayer for the survival of Barack Obama

... Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee
the hands can’t touch what the eyes can’t see...

Muhammad Ali

(i) the bullet speaks of purpose
Trajectory is everything
the difference between a kiss off
the ribcage or the blessed blood
of a ripe organ
The brain
protests the most
neurons
firing over and around the holy
landing trying to make sense
of it
the wailing and the vivid
snapshots metal tendrils reaching
trying to block out the light
(ii) Malcolm pulls Obama's coat
there is no doubt
in my mind they will come for you
dozens at a time
miniature fighter planes built
for such an idealism as yours
They are amazing fish
fanning their steel gills
like razors their fins peeling back
formations neat and orderly as a school
barreling toward the abdomen
heart spleen kidney anywhere
there is light

(iii) Obama plays the dozens
I'm so fast I'll be gone by trigger time
I'm so bad I beat Hillary by 30
I'm so slick not even Bill could sink me
I'm so badass my name is Barack
I'm so chameleon my name is Hussein
I'm so pretty your Mama canvassed for me
I'm so pretty your Mama voted for me
I'm so pretty your Mama is my Mama
I'm so good I shook up the world
I'm so fast I dodged a circus of bullets
I'm so fast I take off the switch and be in bed
before the light comes off

(iv) the bullet takes the bait
Neither disease nor plane crash
not knife or hurricane or freak accident
is as dramatic as me
See the body begin the decompose
in an instant See the body
become particular See
the body become tendrils
of impressionist thought See how
marvellous my entrances
how devastating my exit wounds
I save my best work for the stage.

(v) Bruce Lee knows from bullets
See this fist
this quick a capella kick
kung fu sho nuff
what see this
sidestep Taekwondo Don't
you never think steel is hard
as bone Barack I legacy you
Me every dragon flow
strict mantis pose
struck to cobra swift release
Don't you never think
steel is hard as home
See this river flow bones
see how bullets bury
what they can't kill
See how I live
ecstatic fly jumpsuit
dramatic Barack I legacy you
Me like I loaned Muhammad
the butterfly and the bee we stay
vested historically protected B
We battle terrific Fuck Chuck Norris
I and Jim Kelly's got your hood
and your dome Don't you never
think steel be hard like stone

BILLY COLLINS

Snow Day

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,
its white flag waving over everything,
the landscape vanished,
not a single mouse to punctuate the blankness,
and beyond these windows
the government buildings smothered,
schools and libraries buried, the post office lost
under the noiseless drift,
the paths of trains softly blocked,
the world fallen under this falling.

In a while, I will put on some boots
and step out like someone walking in water,
and the dog will porpoise through the drifts,
and I will shake a laden branch

sending a cold shower down on us both.

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.
I will make a pot of tea
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,

as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed,
the Ding-Dong School, closed,
the All Aboard Children’s School, closed,
the Hi-Ho Nursery School, closed,

along with—some will be delighted to hear—
the Toadstool School, the Little School,
Little Sparrows Nursery School,
Little Stars Pre-School, Peas-and-Carrots Day School
the Tom Thumb Child Center, all closed,

and—clap your hands—the Peanuts Play School.

So this is where the children hide all day,
these are the nests where they letter and draw,
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,
all darting and climbing and sliding,

all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard
in the grandiose silence of the snow,
trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,
what riot is afoot,

which small queen is about to be brought down.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Facing It

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn’t,
dammit: No tears.
I’m stone. I’m flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I’m inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.

I go down the 58,022 names,

half-expecting to find

my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap’s white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet’s image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I’m a window.
He’s lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman’s trying to erase names:
No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.

TRY THIS 2.10
Write a paragraph or a poem exploring your relationship with an animal or a machine. Describe the animal or machine using at least three of the senses.

Or:

Write a poem or paragraph about a relationship between surface and depth—in an eye, a mirror, water, metal...
French Fries

An old woman in a straight-back chair holding a McDonald’s cup. She is surrounded by several bundles of newspapers. She wears thick glasses that distort her eyes to the viewer.

ANNA MAE: If I had one wish in my life, why I’d like to live in McDonald’s. Right there in the restaurant. 'Stead of in this old place, I’ll come up to the brow of the hill, bowed down with my troubles, hurtin’ under my load and I’ll see that yellow horseshoe, sort of like part of a rainbow, and it gives my old spirit a lift. Lord, I can sit in a McDonald’s all day. I’ve done it too. Walked the seven miles with the sun just on its way, and then sat on the curb till five minutes of seven. First one there and the last one to leave. Just like some ol’ french fry they forgot.

I like the young people workin’ there. Like a team of fine young horses when I was growin’ up. All smilin’. Tell you what I really like though is the plastic. God gave us plastic so there wouldn’t be no stains on his world. See, in the human world of the earth it all gets scratched, stained, tore up, faded down. Loses its shine. All of it does. In time. Well, God he gave us the idea of plastic so we’d know what the everlasting really was. See if there’s plastic then there’s surely eternity. It’s God’s hint.

You ever watch folks when they come on in the McDonald’s? They always speed up, almost run the last few steps. You see if they don’t. Old Dobbin with the barn in sight. They know it’s safe in there and it ain’t safe outside. Now it ain’t safe outside and you know it.

I’ve seen a man healed by a Big Mac. I have. I was just sittin’ there. Last summer it was. Oh, they don’t never move you on. It’s a sacred law in McDonald’s, you can sit for a hundred years. Only place in this world. Anyway, a fellia, maybe thirty-five, maybe forty, come on in there dressed real nice, real bright tie, bran’ new baseball cap, nice white socks and he had him that disease. You know the one I mean, Cerebral Walrus they call it. Anyway, he had him a cock leg. His poor old body had it two speeds at the same time. Now he got him some coffee, with a lid on, and sat him down and Jimmy the tow-head cook knew him, see, and he brought over a Big Mac. Well, the sick fellia ate maybe half of it and then he was just sittin’, you know, suffering those tremors, when a couple of ants come right out of the burger. Now there ain’t no ants in McDonald’s no way. Lord sent those ants, and the sick fellia he looked real sharp at the burger and a bunch more ants marched on out nice as you please and his head lollled right over and he pitched himself out of that chair and banged his head on the floor, loud. Thwack! Like a bowling ball dropping. Made you half sick to hear it. We jump up and run over but he was cold out. Well those servin’ kids, so cute, they watered him, stuck a touch pepper up his nostril, slapped him right smart, and bang, up he got. Standin’ an’ blinnin’. ‘Well, how are you?’, we say. An he looks us over, looks right in our eyes, and he say, ‘I’m fine.’ And he was. He was fine! Tipped his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap, big ‘jus’-swallowed-the-canary’ grin, paraded out of there clean, straight like a pole-bean poplar, walked him a plumb line without no trace of the ‘walrus.’ Got outside, jumped up, whooped, hollered, sang him the National Anthem, flagged down a Circle Line bus, an’ rode off up Muhammad Ali Boulevard wavin’ an’ smilin’ like the King of the Pharaohs. Healed by a Big Mac. I saw it.

McDonald’s. You ever seen anybody die in a McDonald’s? No sir. No way. Nobody ever has died in one. Shoot, they die in Burger Kings all the time. Kentucky Fried Chicken’s got their own damn ambulances.

I asked Jarrell could I live there. See they close up around ten, and there ain’t a thing goin’ on in ’em till seven a.m. I’d just sit in those nice swingy chairs and lean forward. Rest my head on those cool, cool, smooth tables, sing me a hymn and sleep like a baby. Jarrell, he said he’d write him a letter up the chain of command and see would they let me. Oh, I got my bid in. Peaceful and clean.

Sometimes I see it like the last of a movie. You know how they start the picture up real close and then back it off steady and far? Well, that’s how I dream it. I’m living in McDonald’s and it’s real late at night and you see me up close, smiling, and then you see the whole McDonald’s from the outside, lit up and friendly. And I get smaller and smaller, like they do, and then it’s just a light in the darkness, like a star, and I’m in it. I’m part of that light, part of the whole sky, and it’s all McDonald’s, but part of something even bigger, something fixed and shiny... like plastic.

I know, I know. It’s just a dream. Just a beacon in the storm. But you got to have a dream. It’s our dreams make us what we are.

Blacksout

TRY THIS 2.11

Write a short scene between two characters who are engaged in some physical activity (rock climbing, scrubbing the floor, trying to make a fire—pick something). In their conversation, they never acknowledge or refer to whatever they are doing. Play with it.
WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT
Take any passage you have written and underline the abstractions, especially the names of qualities and judgments. Replace each of these with its opposite. In some instances this will make nonsense. In some it may provide an insight. Do any of the changes suggest a way of enriching your idea? Pursue the possibility in a few paragraphs of focused freewrite (see page 1).

If you spent your childhood on either side of the millennium, you’ve probably seen Maurice Sendak’s picture book Where the Wild Things Are. (If not, it’s worth looking up.) It’s a simple story: Max is full of bad-tempered mischief and his mother sends him to bed without his supper. He’s still mad. His room turns into a forest; he sails away to the land of the wild things, who make him king of the wild things, and they all have a great rumpus. When Max stops them with a command, he feels lonely, so he sails back to his bedroom, where his supper is waiting for him.

The question is, where are the wild things? And the answer is, in Max’s head. They represent (very visibly and sensibly) a boy’s tantrum. Notice that the wild things have to be manifested; they must gnash and snarl and make a rumpus in order for there to be a story. Most of the book is taken up (to children’s delight) with the antics of the wild things.

The story also offers an extended real-world message: if you misbehave, you’ll be punished, but your mother will not let you starve.

As you develop a piece, ask yourself: Where are the wild things? Make sure you provide us with the visible (and/or other sense) manifestations of the characters’ emotions. Who are the monsters in this story? What are the wild things in the character’s head?

CHAPTER 3

Voice

- Your Voice
- Persona
- Irony
- Character Voice
- Point of View

... my theory is that everyone has a voice, is a voice, and that you’re not going to lose it by stretching your capacities and seeing what else you can do.

Mark Doty

WARM-UP

Write a speech balloon for each of these characters. Then write a paragraph in the voice of each. Who are the men, and what might they be saying to each other? Who are the women, and what are they talking about? Try to make each character distinct in what they say, their attitude, word choice, and rhythm.
A BASIC PROSODY

... neither form nor content shapes the other. Surely they must shape one another, like a river and its banks.

Milo Williams

**Prosody** is the study of versification, the metrical and auditory structure of poetry. What follows here is a very basic prosody, outlining the major units of sound and meter, the basic principles of rhyme, and a few common stanza patterns.

To begin with, these are the building blocks of poems:

- A **phoneme** is the smallest unit of sound in a language that is capable of conveying meaning. For example, the *s* in *at* conveys a different meaning in conjunction with the *a* than the *t*. A different meaning still is conveyed by adding the *b* sound in *hat*, and a different meaning still by adding the *r* sound in *brat*. Phonemes are either **vowels**, produced by the relatively free passage of air through the oral cavity—for example, *a, o, e*, or **consonants**, produced by a partial obstruction of the air stream: *t, p, g*. Vowels may be pronounced as **long** sounds (*ā, ē, ĕ, as in place, wheat, went*) or **short** sounds (*ā, ǔ, ĕ, as in cat, up, when*). Consonants are divided into categories according to which part of the mouth obstructs the air or the manner of its obstruction, as the **labials** by the lips, the **dentals** by the teeth, the **nasals** by the nose, the glides in a sudden burst, and so forth.

- A **syllable** is a unit of sound uttered in a single expiratory breath, typically containing one or more consonants and a vowel: *mup-, done, he-.* A syllable may be either **stressed** or **unstressed** (**accented** or **unaccented**) according to the relative force with which it is pronounced: *be-GUN, PO-e-trY*. In the **scansion** or measuring of poetry, the stress is marked (avoiding the cumbersome capitals) as follows: *bēgin, poētry*. The **double accent** mark indicates a **secondary stress** (lighter than a stressed, heavier than an unstressed syllable; some prosodists hear a secondary stress in most three-syllable words).

- A **poetic foot** is a measure of syllables usually containing one stressed and one or more unstressed syllables. The poetic feet are marked by slashes:

  Ḣavē / bēgin / tō write / ā vérē.

- A **poetic line** is a unit of verse ended by a typographical break. The line may be **syllabic**, in which case its length is determined by the number of syllables without regard to how many accents it has. Or it
may be accentual, in which case it has a given number of stressed or accented syllables and any number of unaccented syllables. It may be metered verse, in which both accents and syllables are counted and the lines will have a predetermined number of poetic feet, or repetitions of a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (see "Stress and Scansion," below). Or it may be free verse, its length determined by the poet according to the needs of the particular poem. A caesura is a pause that occurs within the line. In a line that is end-stopped, the line break coincides with a pause; if the sense continues from the end of one line to the next, it is called a run-on line, or enjambment.

- A stanza is a grouping of lines within a poem, usually regular and rhymed, with a space break between the groupings. A strophe is a grouping of such lines that is irregular and unrhymed.

**TRY THIS A.1**

With no attempt to make sense, write a four-line verse in which the vowel sounds are all short. (For example: Flat on his back / the summer shop cat runs / his love and stiver pot / What fickle chumps.) Then a four-line verse in which all the vowel sounds are long.

**Time**

Three terms having to do with the time element of poetry are sometimes used interchangeably, though in fact they differ in meaning.

- **Tempo** refers to the speed or slowness of a line.
- **Meter** comes from the Greek "measure" and refers to the mechanical elements of its rhythm, the number of feet, stresses and unstressed syllables; it is a relatively objective measurement.
- **Rhythm** refers to the total quality of a line's motion, affected by tempo and meter but also by emotion and sound.

Meter is something that can be measured, whereas rhythm is a feeling, a sense. It would be appropriate to say of a line or poem that the tempo is fast or slow, the meter is lambic pentameter or trochaic dimeter, and that the rhythm is lilting, urgent, effortful, or sluggish.

**Stress and Scansion; the Poetic Foot**

English is a stress language, the pattern of speech determined by the emphasis given to some syllables over others. This fact is so ingrained in us that it's difficult to understand a language otherwise constituted, but Greek, for example, is a language measured in vowel length, and Chinese is patterned in pitch rather than stress.

**Accentual verse** employs a meter in which only the stresses are counted:

When the watchman on the wall, the Shielings' lookout
whose job it was to guard the sea-cliffs,
saw shields glittering on the gangplank
and battle-equipment being unloaded
he had to find out who and what...

*Seamus Heaney's translation of Beowulf*

(Here, each line has four stresses, but they have 12, 9, 11, and 8 syllables, respectively.)

**Syllabic verse** employs a meter in which only the syllables are counted, as in these lines by W. H. Auden, which keep to nine syllables each although the number of stresses diminishes from five to four to three:

Blåe the sky beyon så huvinning sáll
As I sit today by our ship's rál
Watching exuberant rópsolés...

**TRY THIS A.2**

Write a "phone poem" as syllabic verse. Use as the title a phone number (of any length you choose) real or invented. The subject of the poem is a phone call to that number; it may be a narrative about the call, or in dialogue, or a monologue of one side of the conversation, or any combination. Each line has the number of syllables of each consecutive digit. So if the phone number is 587-9043, the first line has five syllables, the second eight syllables, the third seven, and so forth. A zero is silence.

Most formal English verse counts both stresses and syllables and is scanned by measuring the line into stressed (or accented) and unstressed (or unaccented) syllables.

A poetic foot is a unit of measurement with one stress and either one or two unstressed syllables, scanned in these basic patterns:

- An **lamb** has one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed: around.

  *A lamb* is the most common meter in English, probably because we tend to begin sentences with the subject, and most nouns are preceded by an article, as in: the girl, the sky, an apple.

  His house / is in / the vil/lae though.

Note that when the scansion is marked, the feet are separated by slashes even if the foot ends between two syllables of a word.
• A trochee is the opposite of an iamb—a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed: heavy.

  Trochaic rhythms do tend to be heavy, hitting hard and forcefully on the stress.

  Double, / double / toil and trouble

• An anapest consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stress: un fade find.

  Notice that anapest is not an anapest, though it would be if I say: You're a nuisance and a pest! Anapestic rhythms tend to be rollicking frolic and light verse; it is the meter of Gilbert and Sullivan.

  From my head / to my toes / I'll all cov' erid if rós' es.

• A dactyl is a poetic foot that begins with a stress followed by two unstresses: carpenter.

  Dactylic meters tend toward the mysterious or incantatory and are rare, though you are likely to have encountered a few in school:

  This is the / forest / merveil, the / murmuring / pines and the / hémlocks.

• A spondee is a foot with two stresses, which can be substituted for any other foot when special emphasis is wanted (you won't want to, and can't, write a whole poem in it):

  One, two. / Buckle / my shoe.

• A pyrrhic foot is the opposite, a substitute foot with two unstressed syllables, as in the fourth foot below:

  Thou art / laed / just, lost, / if / contented

  With thee ...

  Sometimes, as here, a spondee is balanced with a pyrrhic, so the number of stresses remains the same as in a regular line.

Those are the feet, four basic and two substitute, that you need to begin with, although infinite variations are possible, many of which have names (chiasmatic, tonic, amphibrach, anacrusis), if your interest inclines you to seek them out.

TRY THIS A.3

Practice scanning anything at all, marking the stresses of a sentence or a cereal box, exaggerating as you pronounce the words to hear the stresses. Although scanlon is not a science—people pronounce words with different emphasis according to region and habit—the more you practice the more you will hear the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, and the more you will be able to direct the stresses of your own poetry.

A line of poetry in a regular meter will be scanned according to the number of feet in that line (the following examples are in iambics):

• Monometer—one foot: If I

• Dimeter—two feet: If I / don't go

• Trimeter—three feet: If I / don't go / away

• Tetrameter—four feet: If I / don't go / away / today

• Pentameter—five feet: If I / don't go / away / today / I won't

• Hexameter—six feet: If I / don't go / away / today / I'll never go

• Heptameter—seven feet: If I / don't go / away / today / I'll never go / all.

You're unlikely to run into (or write) a metered line longer than this.

TRY THIS A.4

Practice meter—remember not to worry about making sense—by setting yourself more or less arbitrary rules: Write three lines of iambic tetrameter, six of trochaic trimeter, and so forth. Mark the scansion of your lines; read them aloud until you're confident you hear the stresses.

Pick a favorite nursery line or lyric (country, Irish, rock, Shakespeare, hip hop, opera); write it down and mark the scansion. Then substitute other words in the same pattern of scansion.

Rhyme

Rhyme is to sound as metaphor is to imagery—that is, two things are at once alike and unlike, and our pleasure is in the tension between that likeness and unlikeness. In the case of rhyme, there are patterns of consonants and vowels that correspond to each other, usually involving the accented syllable and whatever comes after it; there also is a diminishing order of correspondence.

• In rich rhyme, the whole accented syllable sounds alike—any consonants before the vowel, the vowel, and any consonants after. So tend would be a rich rhyme with pretend and intend. Because so many sounds in these syllables correspond, they quickly tire the ear, so whole poems in rich rhyme are rare.

• In a true rhyme—the sound of nursery rhymes and the first wordplay in which most of us indulge—the vowel sounds of the stressed syllable are alike, as are the consonants after the vowel, but not the consonants before it. So tend is a true rhyme for mend and lend and offend. Because true rhyme also requires that the unaccented syllables after the stressed syllable correspond, tender rhymes with spender and tendency with tendency. When the accented syllable ends a rhymed line, it is called a masculine rhyme (out of some outdated notion of strength): mad, sad. When it is followed by an unaccented syllable, it is called a feminine or weak rhyme: tender, blend.
and when followed by two unaccented syllables, a triple or treble rhyme: tenderly, slenderly. (Perhaps these are androgynous?)

- **Off rhyme**, also called **slant rhyme, near rhyme, or half rhyme**, is an imperfect or partial rhyme, usually some consonance or assonance. So tend is a slant rhyme for bland, or tender for splendid. The use of slant rhyme exponentially increases the number of available rhymes in English and can introduce unexpected effects, subtle aural surprises, and interesting variations in tone.

- **Assonance** occurs when the vowel corresponds but not the consonant. Tend assonates with spell and weather and met. As with slant rhyme, assonance teases the ear with subtle correspondences.

- **Consonance** is a correspondence or likeness of the consonants that end a syllable: tend, breed, groaned.

- In **alliteration**, consonants (usually at the beginning of the word or stressed syllable) correspond: tender, tinkle, take, entertain. Alliteration is often used to try to reproduce the sound or emotion of the content:

  > The mildest human sound can make them scatter
  > With a sound like seed spilled...

- Rhymes may be **end rhymes**, coming at the ends of lines, or **internal rhymes**, within the lines. Often the end rhyme of one line will rhyme into the middle of another:

  Body my house
  my horse my hound
  what will I do
  when you are fallen

  "Question," May Swenson

In general, poetry tends toward euphony, the change of one quality of sound to another, from consonants to vowels and back again to facilitate pronunciation and so contribute to flow. But sometimes you will want to produce a sound that is not mellifluous or euphonic but effortful. One way of doing this is the **consonant cluster** demonstrated in the Pope line:

> When Ajax strives / some rock's vast weight / to throw.

Here the consonants butt up against each other at the end of one word and the beginning of the next, so you have to stop between in order to pronounce both: Ajax / strives; rock's / vast; weight / to. At the same time, the two spondees give the line especially heavy stress: some rock's vast weight. A different sort of cacophony is achieved when vowels end one word and begin the next:

> And oft / the ear / the o/pén wów/als síre.

**TRY THIS A.5**

Go back to **Try This 10.4** on page 304—the list of words related to your area of expertise. Are there any rich rhymes? True rhymes? Slant rhymes? Arrange a short list to form a line that alliterates (my list of spices might yield cardamom, cayenne, curry, cloves); and a line that assonates (Sage, boy, carraway, arrowroot); and a line with rhymes true or slant (Dill weed, poppy seed, culm seed, bay leaves, cloves). Play around with combinations of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance: Chili, cilantro, oregano, cinnamom, / Carraway, cardamom, gumbo, garlic, / Cinnamom, culm, sesame, rosemary. Can you find consonant clusters? Nutmeg / gumbo; bay leaves / turmeric / cayenne.

Verses with end rhymes are said to have a rhyme scheme, and this is counted by giving the rhyme words a single letter of the alphabet, so a rhyme in which the first and third lines rhyme, and the second and forth line rhyme, would be said to have an ABAB rhyme scheme.

**Stanzas**

The most common form of English poetry is **blank verse**, unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic probably because of our habitual arrangement of articles and nouns, pentameter probably because that length represents a comfortable expulsion of breath, unrhymed probably because it is the most flexible of the formal patterns—the nearest to free verse. It is the form of Shakespeare’s plays, of Milton’s Paradise Lost, of Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall,” Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning,” and innumerable modern poems. Blank verse runs to any length and is not broken into set blocks of lines. But most patterned verse is written in stanzas.

A **stanza** is a division of lines in a poem, usually linked by a pattern of meter or sound, and usually repeated more than once. It is beyond the scope of this book to enumerate the various, multifarious, loose and strict, simple and elaborate, Eastern and Western stanza forms. But here are a few that are basic to English verse, and a few from other cultures that have attracted a good deal of poetic play in the English of the past few decades.

- **Couplet**: A two-line stanza, usually consecutively rhymed, although unrhymed couplets are also common in modern verse. A **heroic couplet** is two lines of iambic pentameter consecutively rhymed:

  > The little hours: two lovers herd upstairs
  > two children, one of whom is one of theirs.

  "Almost Aesop," Marilyn Hacker
• **Tercet** is a stanza of three lines (rhymed or unrhymed):
  
  While mopping she muses over work undone,
  Her daily chores. The blue floor tiles
  Reflect where she cleans and her thoughts run ...

  "The Housekeeper," Wendy Bishop

• **Triplet** is a stanza of three lines consecutively rhymed:
  
  I was bedded by a handsome squire,
  Consoled for him by a gentle friar,
  And after him by half the choir.

• **Quatrain** is a stanza of four lines—of which the **ballad meter** is famous in English—usually four lines of iambic tetrameter, or alternating tetrameter and trimeter, rhymed only on the second and fourth lines (though there are many variations, of both meter and rhyme scheme). The ballad tells a story, often of betrayal and violence:

  Put your hand behind the wainscot,
  You have done your part;
  Find the penknife there and plunge it
  Into your cold heart.

  W. H. Auden

• The **song** or **lyric** is often in quatrains of iambic tetrameter with a rhyme scheme of ABAB or ABBA.

• And so forth. A **quintet** has five lines, a **sestet** six, a **septet** seven, and an **octave** eight.

• The **sonnet** is a poem of fourteen lines, usually printed without a stanza break although the lines are internally grouped. The sonnet gained its popularity as an import from Italy during the Renaissance, where it was densely rhymed and usually dealt with the subject of love, especially unrequited (something like country-western music today.) Because of the paucity of English rhymes, the Italian or Petrarchan rhyme scheme (ABBA ABBA CDECDE) was adapted in English to the **looser** scheme (ABAB CDCD EFEE GG). The sonnet is a good example of the way form influences meaning. Petrarchan sonnets have a strong tendency to develop an idea in the first eight lines (or **octet**) and then to elaborate or contradict or alter it at some length in the last six lines (**sestet**). But the English sonnet, including those of Shakespeare, evolved in such a way that the three quatrains develop an idea, which must then be capped, or contradicted, or changed in a punchy couplet

  at the end. Here is an example from Shakespeare that is likely to be familiar:

  Let me not to the marriage of true minds
  Admit impediments. Love is not love
  Which alters when it alteration finds,
  Or bends with the remover to remove:
  O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
  That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
  It is the star to every wandering bark,
  Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
  Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
  Within his bending sickle's compass come:
  Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
  But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
  If this be error and upon me proved,
  I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

  Like the sonnet, most of the forms that we think of as typically English were actually adapted from other languages. Terza rima, rondeau, sestina, ghazal, pantoum, villanelle—any and all of these are worth seeking out (the books recommended in Chapter 10, page 317, will provide definitions and examples). Meanwhile, of the non-English forms that have become popular, none is more so than the shortest of them, the **Japanese haiku**, an unrhymed verse of seventeen syllables arranged in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. And none of them provides better practice for encapsulating an emotion or idea in a sharply etched observation, whether **reflective**:

  Escaped the nets,
  escaped the ropes—
  moon on the water

  —or cynical:
  a bath when you're born
  a bath when you die,
  how stupid.

  Issa
TRY THIS A.G.
Write a series of quatrains. Choose some meter and rhyme scheme in advance—lambic tetrameter in a pattern of ABBA rhymes, for example. This will be an “altar poem” to someone you want to honor. In the first line, name or describe a place that would be appropriate to honor this person. In subsequent lines, list or describe the objects you would bring and assemble in that place. Try slant rhymes to augment your possibilities. Play around to see if you can use and identify caesura, enjambment, alliteration, assonance.

Write a sonnet as a story: In quatrains one, introduce two characters in a setting; in quatrains two, they are in conflict; in quatrains three, a third character arrives and complicates things; in the couplet, all is resolved.

Write a haiku. Write another. One more.