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 shimmer round the edges...You just lie 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, verses), 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 sensuous responses in the body: heart rate, blood/oxygen flow, muscle reaction, and so forth. Emotional response consists of these physiological reactions, and so in order to have an effect on your reader’s emotions, you must literally get into the limbic system, which you can only 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.

And 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—this little blob of jelly has a mouth.

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**Concrete, Significant Details**

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

*William H. Strunk*

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 buddies,” Macon would tell them. The cat made a comma 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 family’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.”

“No who?” 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 “filth” 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 “filth” 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 makes 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 *crows* 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 poems 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 trowel. I’m fed to the teeth. Read my lips. Many popular metaphors, like 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 patter 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 stomps 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

READINGS

The readings that follow employ imagery and metaphor in a wide variety of ways. For example, Annie Dillard’s “from Heaven and Earth in Jest,” a short essay from her book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, represents a single sharp observation of nature, dense with metaphor. David Sedaris’s “What I Learned” satirizes higher education by substituting bizarre details for the familiar and expected ones.

Read each selection once, fast, for content and pleasure; then a second time consciously aware of images and metaphors. What effect do they have on you? How? What technique might you imitate, absorb, try, steal?

Among the readings you’ll find some triggers for play in your journal. These are not connected to the readings in any direct or literal way, but may suggest peripheral ways to practice some shape, subject, or skill the writers display. At the end of this and further chapters you will find suggestions for developing your ideas toward a draft of a finished piece.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

ANNIE DILLARD

from Heaven and Earth in Jest

A couple of summers ago I was walking along the edge of the island to see what I could see in the water, and mainly to scare frogs. Frogs have an inelegant way of taking off from invisible positions on the bank just ahead of your feet, in dire panic, emitting a froggy “Yike!” and splashing into the water. Incredibly, this amused me, and, incredibly, it amuses me still. As I walked along the grassy edge of the island, I got better and better at seeing frogs both in and out of the
water. I learned to recognize, slowing down, the difference in texture of the light reflected from mudbank, water, grass, or frog. Frogs were flying all around me. At the end of the island I noticed a small green frog. He was exactly half in and half out of the water, looking like a schematic diagram of an amphibian, and he didn’t jump.

He didn’t jump; I crept closer. At last I knelt on the island’s winter-killed grass, lost, dumb-struck, staring at the frog in the creek just four feet away. He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taut, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck and rumple and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. 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

What I Learned

It’s been interesting to walk around campus this afternoon, as when I went to Princeton things were completely different. This chapel, for instance—I remember when it was just a clearing, cordoned off with sharp sticks. Prayer was compulsory back then, and you couldn’t just fake it by moving your lips; you had to know the words, and really mean them. I’m dating myself, but this was before Jesus Christ. We worshipped a God named Sashatiba, who had five eyes, including one right here, on the Adam’s apple. None of us ever met him, but word had it that he might appear at any moment, so we were always at the ready. Whatever you do, don’t look at his neck, I used to tell myself.
It’s funny now, but I thought about it a lot. Some people thought about it a little too much, and it really affected their academic performance. Again, I date myself, but back then we were on a pass-fail system. If you passed, you got to live, and if you failed you were burned alive on a pyre that’s now the Transgender Studies Building. Following the first grading period, the air was so thick with smoke you could barely find your way across campus. There were those who said that it smelled like meat, no different from a barbecue, but I could tell the difference. I mean, really. Since when do you grill hair? Or those ugly, chunky shoes we all used to wear?

It kept you on your toes, though, I’ll say that much. If I’d been burned alive because of bad grades, my parents would have killed me, especially my father, who meant well but was just a little too gung ho for my taste. He had the whole outfit: Princeton breastplate, Princeton nightcap; he even got the velvet cape with the tiger head hanging like a rucksack from between the shoulder blades. In those days, the mascot was a sabretooth, so you can imagine how silly it looked, and how painful it was to sit down. Then, there was his wagon, completely covered with decals and bumper stickers: “I hold my horses for Ivy League schools,” “My son was accepted at the best university in the United States and all I got was a bill for a hundred and sixty-eight thousand dollars.” On and on, which was just so… wrong.

One of the things they did back then was start you off with a modesty seminar, an eight-hour session that all the freshmen had to sit through. It might be different today, but in my time it took the form of a role-playing exercise, my classmates and I pretending to be graduates, and the teacher assuming the part of an average citizen: the soldier, the bloodletter, the whore with a heart of gold.

“Tell me, young man. Did you attend a university of higher learning?”

To anyone holding a tool or a weapon, we were trained to respond, “What? Me go to college?” If, on the other hand, the character held a degree, you were allowed to say, “Sort of,” or, sometimes, “I think so.”

“So where do you sort of think you went?”

And it was the next bit that you had to get just right. Inflection was everything, and it took the foreign students forever to master it.

“Where do you sort of think you went?”

And we’d say, “Umm, Princeton?”—as if it were an oral exam, and we weren’t quite sure that this was the correct answer.

“Princeton, my goodness,” the teacher would say. “That must have been quite something!”

You had to let him get it out, but once he started in on how brilliant and committed you must be it was time to hold up your hands, saying, “Oh, it isn’t that hard to get into.”

Then he’d say, “Really? But I heard—”

“Wrong,” you’d tell him. “You heard wrong. It’s not that great of a school.”

This was the way it had to be done—you had to play it down, which wasn’t easy when your dad was out there, reading your acceptance letter into a bullhorn.
I needed to temper my dad’s enthusiasm a bit, and so I announced that I would be majoring in patricide. The Princeton program was very strong back then, the best in the country, but it wasn’t the sort of thing your father could get too worked up about. Or, at least, most fathers wouldn’t. Mine was over the moon. “Killed by a Princeton graduate!” he said. “And my own son, no less.”

My mom was actually jealous. “So what’s wrong with matricide?” she asked. “What, I’m not good enough to murder?”

They started bickering, so in order to make peace I promised to consider a double major.

“And how much more is that going to cost us?” they said.

Those last few months at home were pretty tough, but then I started my freshman year, and got caught up in the life of the mind. My idol-worship class was the best, but my dad didn’t get it. “What the hell does that have to do with patricide?” he asked.

And I said, “Umm. Everything?”

He didn’t understand that it’s all connected, that one subject leads to another and forms a kind of chain that raises its head and nods like a cobra when you’re sucking on a bong after three days of no sleep. On acid it’s even wilder, and appears to eat things. But, not having gone to college, my dad had no concept of a well-rounded liberal-arts education. He thought that all my classes should be murder-related, with no lunch breaks or anything. Fortunately, it doesn’t work that way.

In truth, I had no idea what I wanted to study, so for the first few years I took everything that came my way. I enjoyed pillaging and astrology, but the thing that ultimately stuck was comparative literature. There wasn’t much of it to compare back then, no more than a handful of epic poems and one novel about a lady detective, but that’s part of what I liked about it. The field was new, and full of possibilities, but try telling that to my parents.

“You mean you won’t be killing us?” my mother said. “But I told everyone you were going for that double major.”

Dad followed his “I’m so disappointed” speech with a lecture on career opportunities. “You’re going to study literature and get a job doing what?” he said. “Literaturizing?”

We spent my entire vacation arguing; then, just before I went back to school, my father approached me in my bedroom. “Promise me you’ll keep an open mind,” he said. And, as he left, he slipped an engraved dagger into my book bag.

I had many fine teachers during my years at Princeton, but the one I think of most often was my fortune-telling professor—a complete hag with wild gray hair, warts the size of new potatoes, the whole nine yards. She taught us to forecast the weather up to two weeks in advance, but ask her for anything weightier and you were likely to be disappointed.
The alchemy majors wanted to know how much money they’d be making after graduation. “Just give us an approximate figure,” they’d say, and the professor would shake her head and cover her crystal ball with a little cozy given to her by one of her previous classes. When it came to our futures, she drew the line, no matter how hard we begged—and, I mean, we really tried. I was as let down as the next guy, but in retrospect, I can see that she acted in our best interests. Look at yourself on the day that you graduated from college, then look at yourself today. I did that recently, and it was, like, “What the hell happened?”

The answer, of course, is life. What the hag chose not to foretell—and what we, in our certainty, could not have fathomed—is that stuff comes up. Weird doors open. People fall into things. Maybe the engineering whiz will wind up brewing cider, not because he has to but because he finds it challenging. Who knows? Maybe the athlete will bring peace to all nations, or the class moron will go on to become the President of the United States—though that’s more likely to happen at Harvard or Yale, schools that will pretty much let in anybody.

There were those who left Princeton and soared like arrows into the bosoms of power and finance, but I was not one of them. My path was a winding one, with plenty of obstacles along the way. When school was finished, I went back home, an Ivy League graduate with four years’ worth of dirty laundry and his whole life ahead of him. “What are you going to do now?” my parents asked.

And I said, “Well, I was thinking of washing some of these underpants.”

That took six months. Then I moved on to the shirts.

“And now what?” my parents asked.

And, when I told them I didn’t know, they lost what little patience they had left. “What kind of a community-college answer is that?” my mother said. “You went to the best school there is—how can you not know something?”

And I said, “I don’t know.”

In time, my father stopped wearing his Princeton gear. My mother stopped talking about my “potential,” and she and my dad got themselves a brown-and-white puppy. In terms of intelligence, it was just average, but they couldn’t see that at all. “Aren’t you just the smartest dog in the world?” they’d ask, and the puppy would shake their hands just like I used to do.

My first alumni weekend cheered me up a bit. It was nice to know that I wasn’t the only unemployed graduate in the world, but the warm feeling evaporated when I got back home and saw that my parents had given the dog my bedroom. In place of the Princeton pennant they’d bought for my first birthday was a banner reading, “Westminster or bust.”

I could see which way the wind was blowing, and so I left, and moved to the city, where a former classmate, a philosophy major, got me a job on his rag-picking crew. When the industry moved overseas—this the doing of another former classmate—I stayed put, and eventually found work skinning hides for a ratcatcher, a thin, serious man with the longest beard I had ever seen.
At night, I read and reread the handful of books I’d taken with me when I left home, and eventually, out of boredom as much as anything else, I started to write myself. It wasn’t much, at first: character sketches, accounts of my day, parodies of articles in the alumni newsletter. Then, in time, I became more ambitious, and began crafting little stories about my family. I read one of them out loud to the ratcatcher, who’d never laughed at anything but roared at the description of my mother and her puppy. “My mom was just the same,” he said. “I graduated from Brown, and two weeks later she was raising falcons on my top bunk!” The story about my dad defecating in his neighbor’s well pleased my boss so much that he asked for a copy, and sent it to his own father.

This gave me the confidence to continue, and in time I completed an entire book, which was subsequently published. I presented a first edition to my parents, who started with the story about our neighbor’s well, and then got up to close the drapes. Fifty pages later, they were boarding up the door and looking for ways to disguise themselves. Other people had loved my writing, but these two didn’t get it at all. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

My father adjusted his makeshift turban, and sketched a mustache on my mother’s upper lip. “What’s wrong?” he said. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong: you’re killing us.”

“But I thought that’s what you wanted?”

“We did,” my mother wept, “but not this way.”

It hadn’t occurred to me until that moment, but I seemed to have come full circle. What started as a dodge had inadvertently become my life’s work, an irony I never could have appreciated had my extraordinary parents not put me through Princeton.

**TRY THIS 2.7**

Write, quickly, a couple of pages about something banal that you’ve done in the past few days. Then replace at least fifteen nouns with other nouns that are in some way extreme, or inappropriate to the subject at hand. Any usable ideas in there?

**FICTION**

**NADINE GORDIMER**

**The Diamond Mine**

*Love during wartime*

I’ll call her Tilla. You may call her by another name. You might think you knew her. You might have been the one. It’s not by some simple colloquial habit that we “call” someone instead of naming: call him up.

It is during the war, your war, the forties, that has sunk as far away into the century as the grandfathers’ 1914. He is blond, stocky in khaki, attractively near-sighted, so that the eyes, which are actually having difficulty with focus, seem to
be concentrating attentively on her. This impression is emphasized by his lashes, blond and curly as his hair. He is completely different from the men she knows in the life of films—the only men she knows, apart from her father—and whom she expected to come along one day not too far off, Robert Taylor or even the foreigner, Charles Boyer. He is different because—at last—he is real. She is sixteen. He is no foreigner, no materialization of projection from Hollywood. He's the son of friends of her maternal grandmother, detailed to a military training camp in the province where the girl and her parents live. Some people even take in strangers from the camp for the respite of weekend leave; with a young daughter in the house, this family would not go so far as to risk that, but when the man of the family is beyond call-up age an easy way to fulfill patriotic duty is to offer hospitality to a man vouched for by connections. He's almost to be thought of as an elective grandson of the old lady. In war these strangers, remember, are Our Boys.

When he comes on Friday night and stays until Sunday his presence makes a nice change for the three, mother, father, and daughter, who live a quiet life, not given to socializing. That presence is a pleasant element in the closeness between parents and daughter: he is old enough to be an adult like them and, only eight years ahead of her, young enough to be her contemporary. The mother cooks a substantial lunch on the Sundays he's there; you can imagine what the food must be like in a military camp. The father suggests a game of golf—welcome to borrow clubs—but it turns out the soldier doesn't play. What's his game, then? He likes to fish. But his hospitality is four hundred miles from the sea; the soldier laughs along in manly recognition that there must be a game. The daughter: for her, she could never tell anyone, his weekend presence is a pervasion that fills the house, displaces all its familiar odors of home, is fresh and pungent—he's here. It's the emanation of khaki washed with strong soap and fixed—as in perfume the essence of flowers is fixed by alcohol—by the pressure of a hot iron.

The parents are reluctant cinema-goers, so it is thoughtful of this visiting friend of the family to invite the daughter of the house to choose a film she'd like to see on a Saturday night. She has no driving license yet (seventeen was the qualifying age in those days) and the father does not offer his car to the soldier. So the pair walk down the road from streetlight to streetlight, under the trees, all that autumn, to the small town's center, where only the cinema and the pub in the hotel are awake. She is aware of window dummies, in the closed shops that her mother's friends patronize, observing her as she walks past with a man. If she is invited to a party given by a school friend, she must be home strictly by eleven, usually fetched by her father. But now she is with a responsible friend, a family connection, not among unknown youths on the loose; if the film is a nine-o'clock showing, the pair are not home before midnight, and the lights are already extinguished in the parents' bedroom. It is then that, schoolgirlish, knowing nothing else to offer, she makes cocoa in the kitchen, and it is then that he tells her about fishing. The kitchen is locked up for the night, the windows are closed, and it is amazing how strong that presence of a man can
be, that stiff-clean clothing warmed—not a scent, not a breath but, as he moves his arms graphically in description of playing a catch, it comes from the inner crease of his bare elbows, where the sun on Maneuvers hasn’t got at the secret fold, from that center of being, the pliant hollow that vibrates between his collarbones as he speaks, the breastplate rosy down to where a few brownish-blond hairs disappear into the open neck of the khaki shirt. He will never turn dark, his skin retains the sun, glows. Him.

Tilla has never gone fishing. Her father doesn’t fish. Four hundred miles from the sea, the boys at school kick and throw balls around—they know about, talk about football and cricket. The father knows about, talks about golf. Fishing. It opens the sea before her, the salt wind gets in her narrowed eyes, conveying to her whole nights passed alone on the rocks. He walks from headland to headland on down-wet sand, the tide is out—sometimes in midsentence there’s a check, half smile, half breath, because he’s thinking of something this child couldn’t know. This is his incantation; it shuts out the parade-ground march toward killing and blinds the sights that the gun trains on sawdust-stuffed figures on which he is being drilled to see the face of the enemy, to whom he himself is the enemy, with guts (he pulls the intricately perfect innards out of the fish he’s caught, a fisherman’s simple skill) in place of sawdust. The sleeping parents are right: he will not touch her innocence of what this century claims, commands from him.

As they walk home where she used to race her bicycle up and down under the trees, the clothing on their arms—the khaki sleeve, the sweater her mother has handed her as a condition of permission to be out in the chill night air—brushes by proximity, not intention. The strap of her sandal slips, and as she pauses to right it, hopping on one leg, he steadies her by the forearm and then they walk on hand in hand. He’s taking care of her. The next weekend, they kiss in one of the tree-dark intervals between streetlights. Boys have kissed her; it happened only to her mouth. The next Saturday, her arms went around him, his around her, her face approached, was pressed, breathed in, and breathed against the hollow of neck where the pendulum of heartbeat can be felt, the living place above the breast-plate from which the incense of his presence had come. She was there.

In the kitchen there was no talk. The cocoa rose to the top of the pot, made ready. All the sources of warmth that her palms had extended to, everywhere in the house, as a domestic animal senses the warmth of a fire to approach, were in this body against hers, in the current of arms, the contact of chest, belly muscles, the deep strange heat from between his thighs. But he took care of her. Gently loosened her while she was discovering that a man has breasts, too, even if made of muscle, and that to press her own against them was an urgent exchange, walking on the wet sands with the fisherman.

The next weekend leave—but the next weekend leave is cancelled. Instead there’s a call from the public phone at the canteen bar. The mother happened to answer and there were expressions of bright and encouraging regret that the
daughter tried to piece into what they were responding to. The family was at supper. The father’s mouth bunched stoically: Marching orders. Embarkation. The mother nodded round the table, confirming. She—the one I call Tilla—stood up, appalled at the strength to strike the receiver from her mother and the inability of a good girl to do so. Then her mother was saying, but of course we’ll take a drive out on Sunday, say goodbye and Godspeed. Grandma’d never forgive me if she thought…Now, can you tell me how to get there, beyond Pretoria, I know… I didn’t catch it, what mine? And after the turnoff at the main road? Oh, don’t bother, I suppose we can ask at a petrol station if we get lost, everyone must know where that camp is. Is there something we can bring you, anything you’ll need…

It seems they’re to make an outing of it. Out of her stun: that essence, ironed khaki and soap, has been swept from the house, from the kitchen, by something that’s got nothing to do with a fisherman, except that he is a man and, as her father has stated—embarkation—men go to war. Her mother makes picnic preparations: Do you think a chicken or pickled ox tongue, hard-boiled eggs… Don’t know where one can sit to eat in a military camp, there must be somewhere for visitors. Her father selects from his stack of travel brochures a map of the local area to place on the shelf below the windshield. Petrol is rationed, but he has been frugal with coupons; there are enough to provide a full tank. Because of this, plans for the picnic are abandoned—no picnic—her mother thinks, Wouldn’t it be a nice gesture to take the soldier out for a restaurant lunch in the nearest city? There won’t be many such luxuries for the young man on his way to war in the North African desert.

They have never shown her the mine, the diamond mine, although ever since she was a small child they have taken her to places of interest as part of her education. They must have talked about it—her father is a mining-company official himself, but his exploitation is gold, not precious stones—or more likely it has been cited in a general-knowledge text at school: some famous diamond was dug up there.

The camp is on part of the vast mine property, commandeered by the Defense Force. Over the veld there are tents to the horizon, roped and staked, dun as the scuffed and dried grass and the earth scoured by boots—boots tramping everywhere, khaki everywhere, the wearers replicating one another, him. Where will they find him? He did give a tent number. The numbers don’t seem to be consecutive. Her father is called to a halt by a replica with a gun, slow-spoken and polite. The car follows given directions retained differently by the mother and the father; the car turns, backs up, take it slowly for heaven’s sake.

She is the one: There. There he is.

Of course, when you find him you see that there is no one like him, no bewilderment. They are all laughing in the conventions of greeting, but his eyes have their concentrated attention for her. It is his greeting of the intervals between streetlights, and of the kitchen. This weekend that ends weekends
seems also to be the first of winter; it’s suddenly cold, wind bellies and whips at that tent where he must have slept, remote, between weekends. It’s the weather for hot food, shelter. At the restaurant, he chooses curry and rice for this last meal. He sprinkles grated coconut and she catches his eye and he smiles for her as he adds dollops of chutney. The smile is that of a greedy boy caught out and is also as if it were a hand squeezed under the table. No wine—the father has to drive, and young men oughtn’t to be encouraged to drink, enough of that in the Army—but there is ice cream with canned peaches, coffee served, and peppermints with the compliments of the management.

It was too warm in the restaurant. Outside, high-altitude winds carry the breath of what must be early snow on the mountains, far away, unseen, as this drive back to the camp carries the breath of war, far away, unseen, where all the replicas in khaki are going to be shipped. No heating in the family car of those days, the soldier has only his thin, well-pressed khaki and the daughter, of course, like all young girls, has taken no precaution against a change in the weather—she is wearing a skimpy flounced cotton dress (secretly chosen, although he, being older, and a disciple of the sea’s mysteries, probably won’t even notice) that she was wearing the first time they walked to the cinema. The mother, concealing, she believes, irritation at the fecklessness of the young—next thing she’ll have bronchitis and miss school—fortunately keeps a rug handy and insists that the passengers in the back seat put it over their knees.

It was easy to chat in the preoccupations of food along with the budgerigar chitter of other patrons in the restaurant. In the car, headed back for that final place, the camp, the outing is over. The father feels an obligation: at least, he can tell something about the diamond mine that’s of interest, and soon they’ll actually be passing the site of operations again, though you can’t see much from the road.

The rug is like the pelt of some dusty pet animal settled over them. The warmth of the meal inside them is bringing it to life, a life they share, one body. It’s pleasant to put their hands beneath it; the hands, his right, her left, find one another.

...You know what a diamond is, of course, although you look at it as something pretty a woman wears on her finger, hmm? Well, actually it consists of pure carbon crystallized...

He doesn’t like to be interrupted, so there’s no need to make any response, even if you still hear him. The right hand and the left hand become so tightly clasped that the pad of muscle at the base of each thumb is flattened against the bone and interlaced fingers are jammed down between the joints. It isn’t a clasp against imminent parting, it’s got nothing to do with any future, it belongs in the urgent purity of this present.

...The crystallization in regular octahedrons, that’s to say eight-sided, and in allied forms and the cut and polished ones you see in jewelry more or less follow...
rug. Now he slowly released, first fingers, then palms—at once awareness signalled between them, that the rug was their tender accomplice, it must not be seen to be stirred by something—he released himself from her and for one bereft moment she thought he had left her behind, his eight-year advantage prevailed against such fusion of palms as it had done, so gently (oh, but why), when they were in the dark between trees, when they were in the kitchen.

...colorless or they may be tinted occasionally yellow, pink, even black...

The hand had not emerged from the rug. She followed as if her eyes were closed or she were in the dark; it went as if it were playing—looking for a place to tickle, as children do to make one another wriggle and laugh—where her skirt ended at her knee, going under her knee without displacing the skirt and touching the tendons and the hollow there. She didn’t want to laugh (what would her father make of such a response to his knowledgeable commentary), so she glided her hand to his and put it back with hers where it had been before.

...one of the biggest diamonds in the world after the Koh-i-noor’s hundred and nine carats, but that was found in India...

The hand, his hand, pressed fingers into her thigh through the cotton flounce, as if testing to see what was real about her, and stopped, and then out of the hesitation went down and, under the rug, up under the gauze of skirt, moved over her flesh. She did not look at him and he did not look at her.

...and there are industrial gems you can cut glass with, make bits for certain drills, the hardest substance known...

At the taut lip of her panties he hesitated again, no hurry, all something she was learning, he was teaching, the anticipation in his fingertips, he stroked along one of the veins in there in the delicate membranelike skin that is at the crevice between leg and body (like the skin that the sun on Maneuvers couldn’t reach in the crook of his elbow), just before the hair begins. And then he went in under the elastic edge and his hand was soft on soft hair, his fingers like eyes attentive to her.

...Look at this veld—nothing suggests one of the greatest ever, anywhere, down there, down in what we call Blue Earth, the diamondiferous core...

She has no clear idea of where his hand is now, what she feels is that they are kissing, they are in each other’s mouths although they cannot look at one another.

Are you asleep back there? The mother is remarking her own boredom with the mine. He is eight years older, able to speak: Just listening. His finger explores deep down in the dark, the hidden entrance to some sort of cave with its slippery walls and smooth stalagmite. She’s found, he’s found her.

The car is passing the mine processing plant.

...product of the death and decay of forests millennia ago, just as coal is, but down there the ultimate alchemy, you might say...

Those others, the parents, they have no way of knowing. It has happened, it is happening under the old woolly rug that was all they could provide for her. She is free of them. Found, and they don’t know where she is.
At the camp, the father shakes the soldier’s hand longer than in the usual grip. The mother for a moment looks as if she might give him a peck on the cheek, Godspeed, but it is not her way to be familiar.

Aren’t you going to say goodbye? She’s not a child, good heavens, a mother shouldn’t have to remind of manners.

He’s standing outside one of the tents with his hands hanging open at his sides as the car is driven away, and his attention is upon her until, with his furry narrowed sight, he’ll cease to be able to make her out, while she can still see him, see him until he is made one with all the others in khaki, replicated, crossing and crowding, in preparation to embark.

If he had been killed in that war they would have heard through the grandmother’s connections.

Is it still you, somewhere, old.

TRY THIS 2.8
Write a paragraph about a thrilling or anguishing incident from your childhood or adolescence. Evoke the emotion you felt in images of all five senses how the scene (perhaps including your own body) looked to you, sounded, felt, smelled, tasted. Allow yourself whatever personification, metaphor, or simile occurs to you, no matter how extreme.

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...

Muhammed 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

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 Tae Kwon 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 Muhammed

the butterfly and the bee we stay
vested - historically protected B
We battle terrific Fuck Chuck Norris
me 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 2.9
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 …

DRAMA

DON NIGRO

Come into the Garden, Maud

Characters
JOHN: twenty-seven
PHOEBE: twenty-one
JILL: twenty-four
Setting: Stage right, a chair with a small wooden table on which are a lamp and telephone in John’s house. Stage left, the same, with a phone book, in Phoebe’s house. The rest of the stage is in darkness.

Playwright’s Note: Late one night in Malvern, in 1993, the phone rang, and it was a slightly inebriated man who announced, with no preamble whatsoever, “Your cat’s in my garden.” It took me a long time to convince him that he had the wrong number, as he was, in fact, as I was finally able to establish, attempting to reach a relative of mine with the same last name whose cat kept relieving himself in this man’s garden. We finally straightened it out, but for some reason the incident stayed with me. There was something rather unsettling about the ability of a total stranger to make a noise in my kitchen in the middle of the night and thrust one unexpectedly into a violent disagreement about the nature of reality—that is, whether or not there was a cat, or a garden, and if it was my cat, and if my cat was indeed in his garden. It seemed to me to be a rather profound question, somehow. The title is from Tennyson’s long poem, Maud, part of which I set to music for James Joyce to sing in Lucia Mad.

Phoebe turns on the light by her telephone. She wears a rather fetching nightie. She sits, looks up a number in the book, dials. John’s telephone rings. After a bit, John appears, wearing only pajama bottoms, turns on his lamp, and picks up the phone.

JOHN: Hello?
PHOEBE: Your cat’s in my garden.
JOHN: What?
PHOEBE: Your cat’s in my garden.
JOHN: I think you’ve got the wrong number.
PHOEBE: No I don’t.
JOHN: Yes you do.
PHOEBE: Is this the Murphy residence?
JOHN: Yes.
PHOEBE: Your cat’s in my garden.
JOHN: Who are you trying to reach?
PHOEBE: Murphy.
JOHN: Well, there’s about a hundred Murphys in the phone book. You’ve just got the wrong one.
PHOEBE: I don’t think so.
JOHN: I’m afraid you do. Good-bye.

(He hangs up, turns off the light, and goes, as Phoebe redials. John’s phone rings. He returns, turns on the light, picks up the phone.)

Hello?

PHOEBE: Your cat’s in my garden.
JOHN: My cat is not in your garden.
PHOEBE: Yes she is. I can see her out my window.
JOHN: Maybe you can see a cat out your window, but it’s not mine, because
I don’t have a cat.
PHOEBE: Yes you do.
JOHN: No I don’t.
PHOEBE: I know you have a cat, because it’s in my garden.
JOHN: Look, it’s four o’clock in the morning, and you have the wrong number,
so would you please stop calling me?
PHOEBE: Your cat is in my garden. Don’t you care?
JOHN: NO, I DONT CARE, BECAUSE I DON’T HAVE ANY GODDAMNED
CAT. I HATE CATS, AND I HATE YOU, SO STOP BOTHERING ME.

(He slams down the phone, turns off the light, goes. Phoebe redials. John’s phone
rings. He returns, turns on the light, and picks up the phone.)

WHAT?
PHOEBE: That was very rude. Why would you hate me? What did I ever do
to you?
JOHN: You keep calling me at four o’clock in the morning.
PHOEBE: Only because your cat’s in my garden.
JOHN: MY CAT IS NOT IN YOUR GARDEN.
PHOEBE: I think you’re in a serious state of denial.
JOHN: WILL YOU PLEASE JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?
PHOEBE: (Starting to cry.) Well, I’m sorry. I was just worried about your cat. You
don’t have to yell at me.

(She cries.)

JOHN: Don’t cry. I didn’t mean to yell at you. I’m really tired, and you’ve just
called me three times in the middle of the night to tell me my cat’s in your
garden.
PHOEBE: So you admit it.
JOHN: No, I don’t admit it.
PHOEBE: You just said your cat was in my garden.
JOHN: No, I just—what number were you calling?
PHOEBE: Well, yours, of course.
JOHN: Which Murphy were you calling?
PHOEBE: I was calling you.
JOHN: What’s my name?
PHOEBE: You mean you don’t know?
JOHN: Yes, I know.
PHOEBE: Then what are you asking me for?
JOHN: Looks, Miss—
PHOEBE: Phoebe.
JOHN: Phoebe. That's a lovely name, Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Thank you.

JOHN: The problem is, I don't know anybody named Phoebe.

PHOEBE: You know me.

JOHN: No, I don't know you.

PHOEBE: Yes you do. Your cat's in my garden.

(Pause.)

JOHN: What is my cat doing in your garden, Phoebe?

PHOEBE: Wait a minute. Let me look. (*She peers downstage through an invisible window.*) It's really dark out there. When I first called, she was having sexual intercourse. Well, I presume that's what it was. There was certainly a hell of a lot of screaming going on. Cats are a lot like people, don't you think? You really might want to consider getting her fixed.

JILL: (*Entering, wearing the tops of John's pajamas.*) Who are you talking to?

JOHN: Nobody.

PHOEBE: What?

JOHN: It's just some girl who says my cat's in her garden.

PHOEBE: Who's that? Mrs. Murphy?

JOHN: No, it's not.

PHOEBE: You're not cheating on Mrs. Murphy, are you?

JOHN: There is no Mrs. Murphy.

JILL: Johnny, who is that?

JOHN: It's Phoebe.

JILL: Phoebe who?

JOHN: I don't know.

PHOEBE: So you're sleeping with a woman you're not married to? Is that it?

JOHN: Yes, Phoebe, that's it, that is exactly it, I am sleeping with a woman I'm not married to. I hope that doesn't shock you too much.

PHOEBE: I just hope Mrs. Murphy doesn't find out.

JILL: You told me you weren't seeing anybody.

JOHN: I'm not seeing anybody.

PHOEBE: Then who is that woman?

JOHN: I wasn't talking to you, Phoebe. I was talking to Jill.

JILL: I want to know who this Phoebe is, and I want to know right now.

JOHN: It's a wrong number.

JILL: Then how do you know her name?

JOHN: We were just talking.

JILL: Why are you talking to a wrong number?

JOHN: Because she won't shut up.

JILL: Why don't you just hang up the phone?

JOHN: Because she keeps calling back.
JILL: Why would a wrong number keep calling back?
JOHN: She says my cat's in her garden.
JILL: You don't have a cat.
JOHN: I know that.
JILL: I'm going home.
JOHN: No, wait, wait, Jill, I swear it's the truth. Wait. Phoebe, will you tell Jill why you called, please?
PHOEBE: OK.
JOHN: Talk to her.
JILL: I don't want to talk to her.
JOHN: Talk to her. What have you got to lose?
JILL: (Hesitating, then taking the phone.) Hello?
PHOEBE: Hi, Jill.
JILL: Who is this?
PHOEBE: This is Phoebe. Listen, Jill, does Mrs. Murphy know you're there?
JILL: John told me he wasn't married.
JOHN: I'm not married. (Taking the phone.) Phoebe, just tell her about the cat, all right?
JILL: I don't sleep with married men.
PHOEBE: I don't blame you, Jill.
JOHN: PHOEBE, WILL YOU JUST TELL HER ABOUT THE DAMNED CAT?
PHOEBE: All right, all right. Boy, men get so hysterical when their cats run away, don't they, Jill?
JILL: Phoebe, I'm a little confused here.
PHOEBE: Men confuse me, too. I'd much rather have a cat, but I'm allergic.
JILL: So am I.
PHOEBE: Really? Then how can you sleep with John? Don't you sneeze while you're doing it?
JILL: There's no cat here.
PHOEBE: I know. She's in my garden. And she seems to be growing.
JILL: So John gives you the cat when a woman sleeps over, is that how it works?
PHOEBE: You mean he threw the cat out when he knew you were coming?
Boy, is Mrs. Murphy gonna be pissed.
JILL: He says there is no Mrs. Murphy.
PHOEBE: Then who is that tall woman in the straw hat I see watering his flowers all the time?
JILL: John, you son of a bitch, you ARE married.
JOHN: (Taking the phone.) Phoebe, what the hell have you been telling her?
JILL: That does it. I'm putting my clothes on and getting out of here.
Goodbye, Phoebe.

(Jill slams down the phone and stomps off.)

JOHN: Jill. Wait a minute. I can explain this. Well, some of it.
He goes after her. Phoebe redials. The phone rings. John returns after a bit, weary, and picks up the phone.

Hello, Phoebe. How are you?

PHOEBE: Is Jill all right? I think we got disconnected.

JOHN: Jill has locked herself in the bathroom with her clothes and turned on the shower.

PHOEBE: Gee, I hope she's not going to cut her throat or something.

JOHN: Sounds like a serious option to me, at this point.

PHOEBE: Well, you shouldn't be cheating on your wife like that.

JOHN: I'M NOT MARRIED.

PHOEBE: Then you shouldn't be cheating on that woman in the straw hat.

JOHN: Phoebe, I am not the person you think I am.

PHOEBE: Wait. There's something happening in the garden.

JOHN: What? My cat is eating your watermelons?

PHOEBE: Maybe that's not your cat after all.

JOHN: Oh, no, it's my cat, Phoebe. My cat loves watermelons.

PHOEBE: But this seems to be a lot bigger than a cat. This is a very large object moving in my garden.

JOHN: Maybe it's a bear.

PHOEBE: It could be a bear. I don't know. It seems—

JOHN: What? It's doing the tango, isn't it, Phoebe?

PHOEBE: No, but it seems to have—noticed me. John, there's this big, dark thing in my garden, and it's looking at this window. This is kind of scary. It's so dark out there, I can't see it real clearly, but it seems to be coming toward the house.

JOHN: Phoebe, are you on drugs?

PHOEBE: No, just valium, but it doesn't work on me. This is really spooky. This is pretty alarming. John, could you come over here?

JOHN: I don't know where you live, Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Yes you do. I live right next door.

JOHN: Nobody lives next door to me, Phoebe. There's woods on one side and an empty house on the other.

PHOEBE: It's not empty. It's my house.

JOHN: It isn't your house. Nobody lives there.

PHOEBE: John, this thing is up against the window. It's trying to look in the window at me. You've got to help me.

JOHN: Take it easy, Phoebe. Just tell me your address.

PHOEBE: It's right next to your address. John, it's banging against the window. It wants in my house.

JOHN: Just tell me your last name and I'll look your address up in the phone book.

PHOEBE: You know my last name.

(Sound of glass shattering.)
Oh, my God. It broke the glass. John, get over here right now. I mean it. Right now.
(Blackout on Phoebe. Sound of the dial tone.)


(The light fades on him and goes out.)

END OF PLAY

TRY THIS 2.10
Write two pages of dialogue between two people, one on a cell phone, the other on a land line. They disagree about an object, animal, place, or person. Develop the disagreement using concrete significant details. We should learn where each of them is.

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 6).

Look over the exercises you have done and the passages in your journal, and pick one that interests you. Draw a grid with six boxes across and ten down. Then, with that passage in mind, write at random in a scattering of the boxes:

Five nouns
Five verbs
Four adjectives
Three adverbs
Four exclamations

Now fill in the boxes in such a way as to connect the words into sentences. Again, some may be nonsense. Some may be, or suggest, poetry. Do any give you insight into the piece you were thinking about?