Chapter 3

Voice

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

Finding your own voice as a writer is in some ways like the tricky business of becoming an adult...you try on other people's personalities for size and you fall in love.

A. Alvarez

WARM-UP
Write a speech balloon for each of these characters. Then write a paragraph in the voice of each. Try for subject matter, attitude, word choice, word order, and rhythm such that each paragraph comes recognizably from this character and none of the others.
YOU PICK UP THE PHONE AND SOMEONE SAYS, “HELLO. You’re home, are you?” and with just these five words you know, although you haven’t heard from him for ten years, that Uncle Ed is calling. You turn on the radio and hear “…because the American people…” and before the familiar phrase is out you know exactly which politician is giving a speech. How do you recognize these voices? How is it possible to be so certain with so little information?

Of course, when you literally hear a voice, you have many subtle aural clues—accent, volume, tone, timbre, pitch, rhythm—to help you identify it. As a writer you have only the words, their choice and arrangement, with which to create a unique voice. Yet writers’ voices are recognizable, too. They too create patterns that approximate all the qualities named above. As a reader you fall in love with particular poetic or narrative voices and as a writer you may “try on” or imitate those voices as part of the process of finding your own.

Diction (which is a combination of vocabulary, the words chosen, and syntax, the order in which they are used) can impart particularity to a poem or prose just as tone and pitch and timbre make up a particular voice. Diction will convey not only the facts but what we are to make of them, not only the situation but its emotional coloration, not only the identity but also the attitude of the person who speaks to us from the page. Joan Didion expresses this phenomenon in terms of “grammar,” in the essay “Why I Write”:

All I know about grammar…is its infinite power. To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed. Many people know about camera angles now, but not so many people know about sentences. The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind.

Beyond imitation, if as a writer you pay attention to the image in your mind, and if you develop the flexibility of vocabulary and syntax that allows you to be true to that image, you will be on your way to a voice that is recognizably your own.

Your Voice

We can only talk about ourselves in the language we have available.
If that language is rich, it illuminates us. But if it is narrow or restricted, it represses and conceals us.

Jaan Whitehead

An author’s voice has a quality developed over time, involving recurrent word choice, syntax, imagery, idiom, rhythm, and range. It comes about by a mostly automatic process, the result of practice and the growing confidence that practice brings. Don’t worry about “finding your voice.” Worry about saying things as clearly, precisely, and vividly as you can. Make your language as rich, flexible, and varied as you can make it. In other words: seek to voice, and your voice will follow.

The language that comes naturally to you is the fine and proper foundation of your voice. Nothing rings more false than a writer who puts on the airs of
critical jargon or medieval fantasy or high culture, without having a convincing command of that language. On the other hand, training your awareness of language, stretching both the quantity and the flexibility of your vocabulary, playing at different human voices, can all expand your range.

It can’t hurt to go about adding to your vocabulary in even a self-improvement sort of way—buy a word-a-day calendar, subscribe to “Wordsmith” or “Merriam Webster’s Word of the Day” online, read “On Language” in the Sunday magazine of the New York Times. Buy a really good dictionary. Dissect the diction of the authors you read, and if you don’t know a word, look it up. Every writer I know owns a Roget’s Thesaurus, a blessed aid to locating—not a fancier word to say what you mean! (that chicken is not, really, a chanticleer)—but the word with that exact shade of meaning you almost have in mind (it might well be a broiler or a bantam or a Rhode Island Red).

Alert yourself to language as it is used around you. Listen to people talking, note the flavor of different idioms, record bits of conversation, wander around in the dictionary, push the words around on the page. When you get to the point of revising your manuscript, pay attention to the small unease this or that word occasions in you and focus on how it might please you better.

Begin by knowing, and exploring, the fact that you already have a number of different voices. You speak differently in class from the way you speak (even to the same people) at a party or a bar. You have one diction for your diary and another for your history paper. You use one style of vocabulary and syntax to console a friend and another to ditch a date.

You also have a different vocabulary for shades of meaning, so that according to the circumstances you might describe someone as stuck-up, snobbish, arrogant, haughty, or imperious. There is no such thing as an exact synonym. Each word would be appropriate to a description of a different person, a different mood or tone, a different medium, even a different speaker.

**TRY THIS 3.1**

*Stuck-up, snobbish, arrogant, haughty, imperious.* Pick three of these words and produce an image in words of a person who fits each of them. To what extent does “the picture dictate the arrangement” of the words?

*Then:*

Pick one of the following words and list as many synonyms for it as you can. Pick three of the synonyms and produce an image in words that expresses each. How do the images differ?

- awesome
- shabby
- weird
- far
- smart
- red
Persona

And so there exists a definite sense of a person, a perfectly knowable person, behind the poem.

Mary Oliver

A persona is a mask adopted by the author, which may be a public manifestation of the author’s self, or a distorted or partial version of that self, or a fictional, historical, or mythological character. The concept of a persona allows us to acknowledge that, just as no written account can tell the whole truth about an event, so no “I” of a poem, essay, or story is exactly the same as the person who writes. When you write “as yourself” in your own voice—in a personal essay or a lyric poem, for example—there is nevertheless a certain distance between the person you are as you go about living your daily life and the persona in which you write. The version of yourself that you choose to reveal is part of your meaning. No matter how earnest your attempt to tell “exactly what happened,” “the author” is always a partial or slightly idealized you, writing from a frame of mind more focused and consistent—and probably more virtuous—than any person ever possessed. Even if you are confessing terrible sins, you write as one-who-confesses, which is a particular, and admirable, version of your composite total self.

When you speak in your “own” voice, that voice may be relatively intimate and confiding—one that, though artful, we trust to be as honest with us as possible, as in this memoir-poem of Anne Sexton’s, “Young.”

A thousand doors ago
when I was a lonely kid
in a big house with four
garages and it was summer
as long as I could remember
I lay on the lawn at night,
clover wrinkling under me,
the wise stars bedding over me,
my mother’s window a funnel
of yellow heat running out,
my father’s window, half shut,
an eye where sleepers pass
and the boards of the house
were smooth and white as wax
and probably a million leaves
sailed on their strange stalks
as the crickets ticked together
and I, in my brand new body,
which was not a woman’s yet,
told the stars my questions
and thought God could really see
the heat and the painted light,
elbows, knees, dreams, goodnight.
Here one may feel how the words are “found in the picture” in the poet’s mind, how for example the “thousand doors ago” or the “window a funnel of yellow heat running out” reach for an exactness of image, mood, and memory. But the diction might instead signal a more fanciful mask, like this one in which Anne Sexton plays on a conventional image of power and malevolence for her persona:

**Her Kind**

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind….

Prose writers can exercise a similar range of personae. One way of looking at the author of a memoir or personal essay is that that writer is the main character or protagonist of a true story. Again, the persona may be confessional and direct:

When my family packed up and moved from the backwoods of Tennessee to the backwoods of Ohio I was not quite six years old. Like most children at that age I was still a two-legged smudge. Hardly a thing about me was definite except my way of talking, and that soon landed me in trouble. The kids in Ohio took one listen to my Tennessee accent and decided I was a hick. They let me know their opinion by calling me not only hick but hillbilly, ridge runner, clodhopper, and hayseed.

“Coming from the Country,” Scott Russell Sanders

But this is far from the only way you might choose to present your “self” as author. Any number of masks may be donned. Here is Dave Barry writing from the persona of Ignorant Literal-Minded Guy, a mask that has been enormously popular among American essayists since Mark Twain:

…obviously the real cause of the California electricity shortage is: college students. I base this statement on widespread observation of my son, who is a college student, and who personally consumes more electricity than Belgium. If my son is in a room, then every electrical device within 200 yards of that room—every light, computer, television, stereo, video game, microwave oven, etc.—will be running. My son doesn’t even have to turn the devices on; they activate themselves spontaneously in response to his presence.

This comic persona depends partly on exaggeration and an inflated vocabulary, out of tone in relation to the content: *widespread observation, personally consumes, electrical device, spontaneously in response.* It also mocks scientific logic, “basing the statement” on a single case.
TRY THIS 3.2
Imagine (remember?) that you have borrowed (“borrowed”?) a car and been involved in a fender bender. Write an explanation for the police report. Write a monologue (a speech for one voice) explaining the accident to the friend (parent?) whose car you borrowed. Write a letter telling about it to a friend who thinks you are truly cool.

Irony

The great critic and teacher Lionel Trilling identified three sorts of irony available to the writer.

1. Verbal irony: the device by which we say one thing and mean another.
2. Dramatic irony: the mainly theatrical device by which the audience has crucial information that the characters do not.
3. Cosmic irony: our perception of the human condition, in which our efforts are thwarted, often by our best intentions.

The first of these, verbal irony, is a way of using voice. It is achieved by some sort of mismatch between the tone and the content and is capable of myriad effects: serious, comic, threatening, satirical, and so forth. Sarcasm is a crude manifestation of everyday irony: “I really do appreciate you emptying the cat box while I’m eating.” The previous passage by Dave Berry is an example of irony as comedy, the tone suggesting scientific objectivity, the content a domestic complaint. A mismatch between tone and content can also set the scene, as in the understated opening to Michael Chabon’s literary detective novel The Yiddish Policemen’s Union.

Nine months Landsman’s been flopping at the hotel Zamenhof without any of his fellow residents managing to get themselves murdered. Now somebody has put a bullet in the brain of the occupant of 208….

Or it can convey a political point, as in Jonathan Swift’s famous “A Modest Proposal,” in which he enthusiastically “solves” both the overpopulation and the food shortage in Ireland.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled….

Irony is often achieved by using formal or understated language for extreme events, but it can also be a way of characterizing through the voice of someone who makes verbal mountains of molehills. This is Doris from the monologue A Cream Cracker Under the Settee by Alan Bennett:

Couple came round last week. Braying on the door. They weren’t bona fide callers, they had a Bible. I didn’t go. Only they opened the letter box and started shouting about Jesus. “Good news,” they kept shouting.
“Good news.” They left the gate open, never mind good news. They ought to get their priorities right. Shouting about Jesus and leaving gates open. It’s hypocrisy is that.

**TRY THIS 3.3**

Pick a story from today’s newspaper about an outrageous or terrible event. Write a paragraph about it in the tone of an official who considers it politically necessary, a Sunday school teacher explaining it as God’s plan, or a social scientist analyzing it for current trends.

Then:

Write a paragraph about a trivial matter (dividing a cookie, breaking a fingernail, the coffee being too hot, or something similar) in a tone of outrage.

**Character Voice**

“I'll tell my state as though 'twere none of mine.”

*Robert Browning*

In ways other than ironic, you may also speak in the persona of a character who is largely or totally unlike you. A **character**'s voice is a chosen mimicry and is one of the most rewarding devices of imaginative writing, a skill to pursue in order to develop rich characters both in their narratives and in their dialogue. Your voice will never be entirely absent from the voice of the characters you create, but the characters too can be distinct and recognizable.

The voice of a character requires, beyond invention, an imaginative leap into the mind and diction of another person. The best way to develop this capability is, first, to listen to other people speaking and to become aware of their speech patterns, vocabulary choice, habits of diction; and then to practice launching yourself into the voices you have heard. You already have a foundation for this skill through your knowledge of other writers’ efforts. Here, for example, are some very brief examples, most of them familiar to you, of characters announcing their own identities. Notice how much they tell you about themselves, the worlds they inhabit, and their attitudes, in a very few words:

Call me Ishmael. (*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville)

My name is Bond—James Bond. (the series of Bond novels by Ian Fleming)

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair. (*Ozymandias*, Percy Bysshe Shelley)

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair.
And I eat men like air. (*Lady Lazarus*, Sylvia Plath)
I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw. (Hamlet, Shakespeare)

I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. (John 11:25)

I am a man more sinn’d against than sinning. (King Lear, Shakespeare)

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap…. (The Catcher in the Rye, J. D. Salinger)

When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (Angela’s Ashes, Frank McCourt)

**TRY THIS 3.4**

Write a short character sketch of someone in your family. Write a monologue in which that person tells you an anecdote from his or her childhood.

You could say, and be roughly accurate, that there is a hierarchy of distance between the author and the voice. The memoirist or personal essayist is most likely to be closest to the person writing; the lyric poet is somewhat more distanced by the artifice of the language; the fiction writer has a range of masks from “author” to characters; and the dramatist speaks only through the characters, theoretically never speaking in his/her own voice except in stage directions.

The voices that you as author create involve not just word choice but the fundamental human capacity for mimicry—which, however, can be deliberately cultivated by careful listening, trial, and error. A character’s voice comes out of, and can convey, a historical period, a class, a set of circumstances, emotions, and the myriad quirks of typicality and eccentricity. Think of the differences in speech between a televangelist and a hip-hop groupie, or even a “master stylist” and the neighborhood barber. Voice, said Philip Roth, is “something that begins at around the back of the knees and reaches well above the head.”

Great potential for contrast, irony, and conflict enters the writing when one voice is set off against another. Characters reveal themselves in conversation and confrontation not only in the ideas they consciously express but in the diction they use, the things that “just slip out,” and the things they refuse or fail to say. The next chapter will look at dialogue, which can lead not only to character revelation but to the heart of story, which is discovery and decision.
TRY THIS 3.5
Go back to the character in your “bumper sticker” exercise on page 21. Find a few more details to describe that character. Then pick a trigger line from those below and use it to start a monologue in that character’s voice. If you feel you are not catching the voice, never mind; keep going.

- I don’t normally dress this way, but…
- I had a dream last night…
- I’ll tell you what doesn’t make any sense…
- I’m sorry, I didn’t see you…
- What I need is some kind of work that…
- I remember when you could…

Point of View

I am the narrator. I am just up in the sky telling the story. I just know everything. So pay no attention to me.

Josiah Sable, ten years old

Closely allied to the concept of voice is point of view. We’re used to using the phrase “point of view” as a synonym for “opinion,” as in, “It’s my point of view that young people watch too much television.” But point of view as a literary technique is a complex and specific concept, dealing with vantage point and addressing the question: Who is standing where to watch the scene? The answer will involve the voice of the teller, the intended listener, and the distance or closeness of both the action and the diction. An author’s view of the world, as it is and as it ought to be, will ultimately be revealed by manipulation of the point of view, but not vice versa—identifying the author’s beliefs will not describe the point of view of the work.

Point of view is a slippery concept, but one over which you gradually gain control as you write. Apart from significant detail, there is no more important skill for a writer to grasp, for, as Carol Bly says in The Passionate, Accurate Story, these are the two skills that “divide master from apprentice.” Once you have chosen a point of view, you have in effect made a “contract” with the reader, and it will be difficult to break the contract gracefully. If you have restricted yourself to the mind of Sally Anne for five pages, as she longingly watches Chuck and his R&B band, you will violate the contract by suddenly dipping into Chuck’s mind to let us know what he thinks of groupies. We are likely to feel misused—and likely to cancel the contract altogether if you suddenly give us an omniscient lecture on the failings of the young.

The first point of view decision that you as a writer must make is the person in which you speak: first person (I walked out into the rain), second person (You walked out into the rain), or third person (She walked out into the rain).
All of the examples of persona in this chapter so far are in the **first person**: *I was a lonely kid...I have gone out, a possessed witch...I was not quite six years old...I base this statement...Call me Ishmael,* and so forth. The first person is the point of view most frequent in memoir, personal essay, and lyric poetry. Characters in a play speak, of course, in the first person. It is also the voice of much fiction, in which case it will be the voice of the **central narrator**, the *I* writing *my* story as if it were memoir; or else of a **peripheral narrator**, someone on the edge of the action, but nevertheless our eyes and ears in the story and therefore the person with whom we identify and with whom we must be moved or changed if the story is to succeed.

Notice that when you are writing in the first person voice of a fictional or dramatic character, the whole range of intimacy and distance is also possible in the diction. Bohumil Hrabel’s young railway employee in the novel *Closely Observed Trains* tells his own story and takes us into his confidence as if he were writing a confessional memoir, in spite of the fact that he never existed:

> I always had the impression—and I still have and always shall have—that behind every window there was at the very least one pair of eyes watching me. If anyone spoke to me I blushed, because I felt uncomfortably aware that there was something about me that disturbed and upset everybody. Three months ago I slashed my wrists, and on the face of it I had no reason to do such a thing, but I did have a reason, and I knew what it was, and I was only afraid that everyone who looked at me was guessing at what that reason could be.

By contrast, in the play *Our Country’s Good*, Timberlake Wertenberger’s Judge Collins of eighteenth-century Australia uses the distanced diction of profound and self-satisfied authority:

> This land is under English law. The court found them guilty and sentenced them accordingly...I commend your endeavor to oppose the baneful influence of vice with the harmonizing acts of civilization, Governor, but I suspect your edifice will collapse without the mortar of fear.

The **second person** is being used whenever the pronoun “you” occurs, but this may simply mean, in dialogue, that one character is addressing another. Sometimes it indicates not the point of view of the story but a general truth, possibly one in a character’s mind:

> Maureen was trying to write her weekly letter to Len. It was heavy going; you can’t say much in a letter.

*The Ice Age, Margaret Drabble*

Or the pronoun “you” may represent the convention of the author addressing the reader:

> You might think it’s a bit rare, having long-distance cross-country runners in Borstal…but you’re wrong, and I’ll tell you why.

*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Alan Sillitoe*
Often, as in this case, the “you” refers to the person who is assumed to read or receive the piece. The basic point of view is still first person, as it is in Sharon Olds’s poem “Feared Drowned,” of which these are the first two stanzas:

Suddenly nobody knows where you are,
your suit black as seaweed, your bearded head slick as a seal’s.

Somebody watches the kids. I walk down the edge of the water, clutching the towel like a widow’s shawl around me…

This use of the second person, as someone to whom speech, a poem, or story is addressed, can enhance a sense of intimacy, even make us feel as readers/viewers that we are overhearing something private.

The second person is the basic point of view of a piece only when the “you” is a character—usually in fact the reader, whom the author turns into a character by assuming she knows just how “you” behave in the situation she invents. Here is an example from Lorrie Moore’s story “How to Be a Writer”:

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. The movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen. Early, critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom.

The second person as a basic point of view, in which “you” become the character, tends to be experimental and self-conscious, and may be set aside or saved for special effects.

**TRY THIS 3.6**

Write about a situation in which you were badly stressed. But write about it in the first person from the point of view of someone else who was present.

Or:

Write about it in the second person, keeping in mind that you’re trying to make your reader identify and “become you.”

The third person is frequently used in poetry and fiction, as well as being the basic voice of the nonfiction writer. This is the voice with the greatest range of effects, from total objectivity to great intimacy.

The third person voice in imaginative writing can be roughly divided into three techniques:

- The omniscient or godlike narrator, who may know anything past, present, or future and is free to tell us readers what to think or feel
The limited omniscient, who may go into the mind of one or perhaps two characters and also observe from the outside

The objective, who may know no more than a person observing the scene—the facts and whatever is present to the senses

The omniscient author was a frequent stance of nineteenth-century fiction, where the persona of “author” took on an all-knowing quality:

Caroline Helstone was just eighteen years old; and at eighteen the true narrative of life has yet to be commenced. Before that time, we sit listening to a tale, a marvelous fiction; delightful sometimes, and sad sometimes; almost always unreal. . . . Hope, when she smiles on us, and promises happiness tomorrow, is implicitly believed;—Love, when he comes wandering like a lost angel to our door, is at once admitted, welcomed, embraced. . . . Alas, Experience! No other mentor has so wasted and frozen a face...

Shirley, Charlotte Brontë

This voice obviously involves a lot of “telling,” and in order to avoid that outdated tone, in the twentieth century it became usual for “the author” to assume the more modest capability of the limited omniscient, able to go into one character’s mind and emotions and also to tell us objectively what, if we were present, we would be able to perceive for ourselves, but not to leap from the mind of one character to another.

By the time they were halfway through Harvard Yard, Tip was seriously questioning the wisdom of his own decision to leave the house at all. His leg had progressed far beyond aching. The pain in his sciatic nerve was sharp and somewhat electrical in nature....He had, despite all better knowledge, dug the crutches into his brachial plexus and slowly crushed it, sending a radiation up his neck and into the back of his head that was like a persistent hammer slamming a reluctant nail.

Run, Ann Patchett

The perception in these two passages involves the vulnerability and inexperience of youth, but in the first the convention of “the author” holds all the answers, whereas in the second “the author” is an unvoiced presence. We experience Tip’s pain and his self-questioning from the inside, while at the same time getting a quasiscientific explanation of the source of pain. Since Tip is a scientist, this factual information is appropriate to the character.

In the objective viewpoint, the author may choose a strictly journalistic stance, reporting only what may be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, and objectively known. This is a favorite stance of Ernest Hemingway. In the story, “Hills Like White Elephants,” Hemingway reports what is said and done by a quarreling couple, both without any direct revelation of the characters’ thoughts and without comment.
The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

“What should we drink?” the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

“It’s pretty hot,” the man said.

“Let’s drink beer.”

“Dos cervezas,” the man said into the curtain.

“Big ones?” a woman asked from the doorway.

“Yes. Two big ones.”

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

The narrative remains clipped, austere, and external. What Hemingway gains by this pretense of objective reporting is that the reader is allowed to discover what is really happening through gestures, repetitions, and slips of the tongue, as in life.

**TRY THIS 3.7**

Take any passage you have written in the first person and recast it in the objective voice. Try to reveal the thoughts and feelings of the original through speech, gesture, action, and image.

Beyond the choice of person, point of view importantly involves the question of the **distance** between the author/reader and the characters. John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* succinctly illustrates some of the possibilities of distance in the third person:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never cared much for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside our shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul.

From the impersonality of **large man** through increasingly familiar designations (full name, first name, pronoun), to the identification implied in the second person (**your collar, your shoes, your soul**), these examples reduce the formality of the diction and therefore the psychic and psychological distance between the author-and-reader and the character.

The degree of distance will involve a series of questions, of which **who speaks?** is only the first. It will also involve **to whom?** (the reader? another character? the self?), **in what form?** (a story? a journal? a report? a daydream?), **at what distance?**
(an old man telling the story of his youth? a prisoner recounting his crime?), and with what limitations? (is the narrator a liar? a child? crazy?). The voice of the speaker, whether autobiographical, poetic persona, narrator, or character, always involves these issues. Because the author inevitably wants to convince us to share the same perspective, the answers will also help reveal her or his final opinion, judgment, attitude, or message.

In many ways, our language has been impoverished—by politics, ads, ignorance, and suspicion of eloquence. In the Renaissance it was socially valuable to be able to speak well; you could talk yourself into court or into bed. Whereas in America, and especially from the latter half of the twentieth century, we have tended to equate eloquence with arrogance at best and dishonesty at worst, preferring people who, like, you know, well, kinda couldn’t exactly, like, say what they mean. Sort of. Whole concepts have disappeared via advertising from our fund of expression. We no longer have meaningful ways to say the real thing, or the right choice, or new and improved, or makes you feel young again, or just do it. The words wonderful, great, grand, distinctive, elegant, exclusive, purity, pleasure, passion, mastery, mystery, and natural have been co-opted and corrupted. If I say so much as, “Ask your doctor…” it’s clear that I’ve got something to sell.

Paradoxically, this impoverishment allows the writer myriad ways to characterize. Though it may be difficult to write convincingly from the lofty perspective of all-knowing authority, a rich awareness of voice and voices, their particular idioms and diction, can give you a range of perspectives from which to write. You can make legitimate and revealing use of jargon, cliché, malapropisms (misused words), overstatement, and so forth, in the mouth of a character. Such language is a way of signaling distance between author and character, a distance that the reader understands and shares. A famous example is Amanda Wingfield of Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie, who here berates her son:

Oh, I can see the handwriting on the wall as plain as I see the nose in front of my face! It’s terrifying! More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation—then left! And me with the bag to hold.

### TRY THIS 3.8

Write a speech in which a character strings together a bunch of clichés or jargon phrases. Let the clichés characterize. However, be sure you have some sympathy for the character.

If you persevere in writing, “your voice” will inevitably take on a coloration that is entirely your own. At the same time, voice is a powerful force for exploring
the inner lives of others. Story writer Grace Paley describes the process: “…what we write about is what we don’t know about what we know…when you take this other voice—you’re making a ‘pull.’ You’re pulling towards another head. And that pull toward what you don’t know…well, that’s the story itself. The story is that stretching…that act of stretching.”

More to Read

READINGS

CREATIVE NONFICTION

*Alice Walker*

Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self

It is a bright summer day in 1947. My father, a fat, funny man with beautiful eyes and a subversive wit, is trying to decide which of his eight children he will take with him to the county fair. My mother, of course, will not go. She is knocked out from getting most of us ready: I hold my neck stiff against the pressure of her knuckles as she hastily completes the braiding and then beribboning of my hair.

My father is the driver for the rich old white lady up the road. Her name is Miss Mey. She owns all the land for miles around, as well as the house in which we live. All I remember about her is that she once offered to pay my mother thirty-five cents for cleaning her house, raking up piles of her magnolia leaves, and washing her family’s clothes, and that my mother—she of no money, eight children, and a chronic earache—refused it. But I do not think of this in 1947. I am two and a half years old. I want to go everywhere my daddy goes. I am excited at the prospect of riding in a car. Someone has told me fairs are fun. That there is room in the car for only three of us doesn’t faze me at all. Whirling happily in my starched frock, showing off my biscuit-polished patent-leather shoes and lavender socks, tossing my head in a way that makes my ribbons bounce, I stand, hands on hips, before my father. “Take me, Daddy,” I say with assurance; “I’m the prettiest!”

Later, it does not surprise me to find myself in Miss Mey’s shiny black car, sharing the back seat with the other lucky ones. Does not surprise me that
I thoroughly enjoy the fair. At home that night I tell the unlucky ones all I can remember about the merry-go-round, the man who eats live chickens, and the teddy bears, until they say: that’s enough, baby Alice. Shut up now, and go to sleep.

It is Easter Sunday, 1950. I am dressed in a green, flocked, scalloped-hem dress (handmade by my adoring sister, Ruth) that has its own smooth satin petticoat and tiny hot-pink roses tucked into each scallop. My shoes, new T-strap patent leather, again highly biscuit-polished. I am six years old and have learned one of the longest Easter speeches to be heard that day, totally unlike the speech I said when I was two: “Easter lilies/pure and white/blossom in/the morning light.” When I rise to give my speech I do so on a great wave of love and pride and expectation. People in the church stop rustling their new crinolines. They seem to hold their breath. I can tell they admire my dress, but it is my spirit, bordering on sassiness (womanishness), they secretly applaud.

“That girl’s a little mess,” they whisper to each other, pleased.

Naturally I say my speech without stammer or pause, unlike those who stutter, stammer, or, worst of all, forget. This is before the word “beautiful” exists in people’s vocabulary, but “Oh, isn’t she the cutest thing!” frequently floats my way. “And got so much sense!” they gratefully add... for which thoughtful addition I thank them to this day.

It was great fun being cute. But then, one day, it ended.

I am eight years old and a tomboy. I have a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, checkered shirt and pants, all red. My playmates are my brothers, two and four years older than I. Their colors are black and green, the only difference in the way we are dressed. On Saturday nights we all go to the picture show, even my mother; Westerns are her favorite kind of movie. Back home, “on the ranch,” we pretend we are Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy, Lash LaRue (we’ve even named one of our dogs Lash LaRue); we chase each other for hours rustling cattle, being outlaws, delivering damsels from distress. Then my parents decide to buy my brothers guns. These are not “real” guns. They shoot “BBs,” copper pellets my brothers say will kill birds. Because I am a girl, I do not get a gun. Instantly I am relegated to the position of Indian. Now there appears a great distance between us. They shoot and shoot at everything with their new guns. I try to keep up with my bow and arrows.

One day while I am standing on top of our makeshift garage—pieces of tin nailed across some poles—holding my bow and arrow and looking out toward the fields, I feel an incredible blow in my right eye. I look down just in time to see my brother lower his gun.

Both brothers rush to my side. My eye stings, and I cover it with my hand. “If you tell,” they say, “we will get a whipping. You don’t want that to happen, do you?” I do not. “Here is a piece of wire,” says the older brother, picking it
up from the roof; “say you stepped on one end of it and the other flew up and hit you.” The pain is beginning to start. “Yes,” I say. “Yes, I will say that is what happened.” If I do not say this is what happened, I know my brothers will find ways to make me wish I had. But now I will say anything that gets me to my mother.

Confronted by our parents we stick to the lie agreed upon. They place me on a bench on the porch and I close my left eye while they examine the right. There is a tree growing from underneath the porch that climbs past the railing to the roof. It is the last thing my right eye sees. I watch as its trunk, its branches, and then its leaves are blotted out by the rising blood.

I am in shock. First there is intense fever, which my father tries to break using lily leaves bound around my head. Then there are chills: my mother tries to get me to eat soup. Eventually, I do not know how, my parents learn what has happened. A week after the “accident” they take me to see a doctor. “Why did you wait so long to come?” he asks, looking into my eye and shaking his head. “Eyes are sympathetic,” he says. “If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too.”

This comment of the doctor’s terrifies me. But it is really how I look that bothers me most. Where the BB pellet struck there is a glob of whitish scar tissue, a hideous cataract, on my eye. Now when I stare at people—a favorite pastime, up to now—they will stare back. Not at the “cute” little girl, but at her scar. For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head.

Years later, in the throes of a mid-life crisis, I ask my mother and sister whether I changed after the “accident.” “No,” they say, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

What do I mean?

I am eight, and, for the first time, doing poorly in school, where I have been something of a whiz since I was four. We have just moved to the place where the “accident” occurred. We do not know any of the people around us because this is a different county. The only time I see the friends I knew is when we go back to our old church. The new school is the former state penitentiary. It is a large stone building, cold and drafty, crammed to overflowing with boisterous, ill-disciplined children. On the third floor there is a huge circular imprint of some partition that has been torn out.

“What used to be here?” I ask a sullen girl next to me on our way past it to lunch.

“The electric chair,” says she.

At night I have nightmares about the electric chair, and about all the people reputedly “fried” in it. I am afraid of the school, where all the students seem to be budding criminals.

“What’s the matter with your eye?” they ask, critically.

When I don’t answer (I cannot decide whether it was an “accident” or not), they shove me, insist on a fight.
My brother, the one who created the story about the wire, comes to my rescue. But then brags so much about “protecting” me, I become sick.

After months of torture at the school, my parents decide to send me back to our old community, to my old school. I live with my grandparents and the teacher they board. But there is no room for Phoebe, my cat. By the time my grandparents decide there is room, and I ask for my cat, she cannot be found. Miss Yarborough, the boarding teacher, takes me under her wing, and begins to teach me to play the piano. But soon she marries an African—a “prince,” she says—and is whisked away to his continent.

At my old school there is at least one teacher who loves me. She is the teacher who “knew me before I was born” and bought my first baby clothes. It is she who makes life bearable. It is her presence that finally helps me turn on the one child at the school who continually calls me “one-eyed bitch.” One day I simply grab him by his coat and beat him until I am satisfied. It is my teacher who tells me my mother is ill.

My mother is lying in bed in the middle of the day, something I have never seen. She is in too much pain to speak. She has an abscess in her ear. I stand looking down on her, knowing that if she dies, I cannot live. She is being treated with warm oils and hot bricks held against her cheek. Finally a doctor comes. But I must go back to my grandparents’ house. The weeks pass but I am hardly aware of it. All I know is that my mother might die, my father is not so jolly, my brothers still have their guns, and I am the one sent away from home.

“You did not change,” they say.

Did I imagine the anguish of never looking up?

I am twelve. When relatives come to visit I hide in my room. My cousin Brenda, just my age, whose father works in the post office and whose mother is a nurse, comes to find me. “Hello,” she says. And then she asks, looking at my recent school picture, which I did not want taken, and on which the “glob,” as I think of it, is clearly visible, “You still can’t see out of that eye?”

“No,” I say, and flop back on the bed over my book.

That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty.

“You did not change,” they say.

I am fourteen and baby-sitting for my brother Bill, who lives in Boston. He is my favorite brother and there is a strong bond between us. Understanding my feelings of shame and ugliness he and his wife take me to a local hospital, where the “glob” is removed by a doctor named O. Henry. There is still a small bluish crater where the scar tissue was, but the ugly white stuff is gone. Almost immediately I become a different person from the girl who does not raise her head. Or so I think. Now that I’ve raised my head I win the boyfriend of my dreams. Now that I’ve raised my head I have plenty of friends. Now that I’ve raised my head classwork comes from my lips as faultlessly as Easter speeches did, and I leave
high school as valedictorian, most popular student, and queen, hardly believing my luck. Ironically, the girl who was voted most beautiful in our class (and was) was later shot twice through the chest by a male companion, using a “real” gun, while she was pregnant. But that’s another story in itself. Or is it?

“You did not change,” they say.

It is now thirty years since the “accident.” A beautiful journalist comes to visit and to interview me. She is going to write a cover story for her magazine that focuses on my latest book. “Decide how you want to look on the cover,” she says. “Glamorous, or whatever.”

Never mind “glamorous,” it is the “whatever” that I hear. Suddenly all I can think of is whether I will get enough sleep the night before the photography session: if I don’t, my eye will be tired and wander, as blind eyes will.

At night in bed with my lover I think up reasons why I should not appear on the cover of a magazine. “My meanest critics will say I’ve sold out,” I say. “My family will now realize I write scandalous books.”

“But what’s the real reason you don’t want to do this?” he asks.

“Because in all probability,” I say in a rush, “my eye won’t be straight.”

“It will be straight enough,” he says. Then, “Besides, I thought you’d made your peace with that.”

And I suddenly remember that I have.

I remember:

I am talking to my brother Jimmy, asking if he remembers anything unusual about the day I was shot. He does not know I consider that day the last time my father, with his sweet home remedy of cool lily leaves, chose me, and that I suffered and raged inside because of this. “Well,” he says, “all I remember is standing by the side of the highway with Daddy, trying to flag down a car. A white man stopped, but when Daddy said he needed somebody to take his little girl to the doctor, he drove off.”

I remember:

I am in the desert for the first time. I fall totally in love with it. I am so overwhelmed by its beauty, I confront for the first time, consciously, the meaning of the doctor’s words years ago: “Eyes are sympathetic. If one is blind, the other will likely become blind too.” I realize I have dashed about the world madly, looking at this, looking at that, storing up images against the fading of the light. But I might have missed seeing the desert! The shock of that possibility—and gratitude for over twenty-five years of sight—sends me literally to my knees. Poem after poem comes—which is perhaps how poets pray.

**On Sight**

I am so thankful I have seen
The Desert
And the creatures in the desert
And the desert Itself.
The desert has its own moon
Which I have seen
With my own eye.
There is no flag on it.
Trees of the desert have arms
All of which are always up
That is because the moon is up
The sun is up
Also the sky
The stars
Clouds
None with flags.
If there were flags, I doubt
the trees would point.
Would you?

But mostly, I remember this:

I am twenty-seven, and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother’s eyes are different from other people’s. Will she be embarrassed? I think. What will she say? Every day she watches a television program called “Big Blue Marble.” It begins with a picture of the earth as it appears from the moon. It is bluish, a little battered-looking, but full of light, with whitish clouds swirling around it. Every time I see it I weep with love, as if it is a picture of Grandma’s house. One day when I am putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focuses on my eye. Something inside me cringes, gets ready to try to protect myself. All children are cruel about physical differences, I know from experience, and that they don’t always mean to be is another matter. I assume Rebecca will be the same.

But no-o-o-o. She studies my face intently as we stand, her inside and me outside her crib. She even holds my face maternally between her dimpled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyerlike as her father, she says, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: “Mommy, there’s a world in your eye.” (As in, “Don’t be alarmed, or do anything crazy.”) And then, gently, but with great interest: “Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?”

For the most part, the pain left then. (So what, if my brothers grew up to buy even more powerful pellet guns for their sons and to carry real guns themselves. So what, if a young “Morehouse man” once nearly fell off the steps of Trevor Arnett Library because he thought my eyes were blue.) Crying and laughing I ran to the bathroom, while Rebecca mumbled and sang herself off to sleep. Yes indeed, I realized, looking into the mirror. There was a world in my eye. And I saw that it was possible to love it: that in fact, for all it had taught me of shame and anger and inner vision, I did love it. Even to see it drifting out of orbit in boredom, or rolling up out of fatigue, not to mention floating back at attention in excitement (bearing witness, a friend has called it), deeply suitable to my personality, and even characteristic of me.
That night I dream I am dancing to Stevie Wonder’s song “Always” (the name of the song is really “As,” but I hear it as “Always”). As I dance, whirling and joyous, happier than I’ve ever been in my life, another bright-faced dancer joins me. We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night. The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me.

**TRY THIS 3.9**
Everyone hates something about his or her body. Write a poem or a few paragraphs in the first person about what you hate about yours. What tone will you choose? Are you laughing at yourself, genuinely grieving, wry, angry, over it?

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**WARREN J. BOWE**

**Guns for Teachers**

Finally the Republicans have found a meaningful way to support teachers. As both a teacher and a citizen, I spotted the win-win logic of Representative Frank Lasee’s proposal immediately. Not only would schools be safer, but the billions added to Wisconsin’s economy by a new school gun industry would be a great windfall for the state.

With more than 60,000 teachers in Wisconsin’s public schools alone, such a law would help both mom-and-pop gun shops and the big retailers. Specialty products could include guns manufactured in school colors or engraved with school logos. Gun accessories will bring in additional revenue. I would need an everyday holster as well as one for such special occasions as parent-teacher conferences, concerts, athletic events, etc.

While this proposed legislation is way better than that supporting the shooting of feral cats, a few kinks would need to be worked out. For example, would the state taxpayers fund the law, or would teachers have to pay for the heat they pack? Would there be a special ammunition budget? Would we be given extra in-service time for range practice? Could we implement merit pay for those of us who are crack shots?

And, most important, how threatening would students need to be before we get to shoot them? In the interim, maybe we could just start hitting them again.

**TRY THIS 3.10**
Bowe’s mini-essay belongs to the long tradition of *epistolary essays*, written in the form of a letter, in this case a letter to the editor. It is also in the tradition of “A Modest Proposal.” Write a “modest proposal.” Pick an issue you really care about and “solve” it with a solution drastically worse than the problem. If the problem is one covered in the news, you might send it as a letter to the editor.
Rock Threat Subsides

Parents who have been worried about their children being turned into mindless layabouts by rock-music lyrics will be relieved to hear that, according to the latest scientific studies, teenagers pay virtually no attention to the lyrics of rock songs. In other words, just what is turning these teenagers into mindless layabouts is still open to question.

I should also say, in the spirit of generational fairness, that there have been no studies so far to see what is turning so many parents into mindless layabouts. That is probably a much longer story.

According to an article I read in the Washington Post, one of the most thorough studies ever done on the impact of rock lyrics was recently completed by two psychologists from California State University at Fullerton, Jill Rosenbaum and Lorraine Prinsky. They found that most teenagers don’t listen closely to the words of rock songs, don’t catch a lot of what they do hear, and don’t much care one way or the other. When the teenagers in the survey were asked why they listen to a rock song, “I want to listen to the words” finished dead last.

This information should change one of the standard discussions that parents and teenagers have about rock music—a discussion traditionally carried on in the family automobile at a time when the music blaring from a boom box in the back seat is loud enough to turn the windshield wipers on and off.

Parent (in a patient and mature tone): I can’t imagine why you listen to that moronic garbage.
Teenager: Uhhnn.
Parent: It’s just a lot of thugs making as much noise as they can.
Teenager: Nghh.
Parent: Half the time, you can’t even make out the words to the song anyway.
Teenager: Actually, much more than half the time. But the latest study indicates that this makes no difference whatsoever in my enjoyment of this art form.

That’s right. Teenagers don’t care about the words. They listen to the lyrics of rock songs about as carefully as their parents listen to the lyrics of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

The California study found that the messages supposedly encoded in some rock songs—exhortations to become dope fiends and burn down cities and worship Satan and engage in hideous sexual excesses and leave the dinner table without being asked to be excused and that sort of thing—were lost on teenagers, even when the researchers furnished printouts of the lyrics for the teenagers to peruse. This is, of course, good news for parents and discouraging news for anybody who has put a lot of effort into trying to use rock lyrics to encourage teenagers to do wicked things.
Since teenagers don’t listen carefully to the lyrics, they tend to form their opinion of what the song is about from the title. For instance, the Bruce Springsteen hit “Born in the USA” is described by the *Post* as having “in every verse explicit references to despair and disillusionment.” But kids from fourth grade through college who were tested by researchers from the University of California at Los Angeles were mostly under the impression that “Born in the USA” was a patriotic song.

These results shouldn’t surprise anybody. Most grownups don’t get much past the title of anything, which is why title-writing is such an art. The military is particularly adept at titles. The invasion of Panama, for instance, was called Operation Just Cause. Think of what the public impression of that episode would have been if the Pentagon had chosen a name that would have been, in fact, much less subject to differences of opinion: Operation Tiny Country. Think of how the public view of the war in the Persian Gulf might have differed if our military effort to drive Iraqis from Kuwait had been called not Operation Desert Storm but Operation Restore Despot.

The results of these rock-lyrics studies seem to indicate that putting warning labels on rock records would only draw teenagers’ attention to something they might otherwise ignore—sort of like marking the spines of innocent-looking novels, “Warning: This Book Has Some Good Parts.”

The results also mean that concerned citizens would be wasting their time mounting a campaign to encourage songwriters to compose more uplifting lyrics. That’s a shame. I was sort of looking forward to the forces of good coming up with a song that featured endless repetition of some lyric like “I wanna clean my room” or “I appreciate the great burden of responsibility my father carries and the sacrifices he’s made on behalf of me and my siblings, and I have only the greatest respect for him.” With the right tune, we now know, that might have made the charts, but nobody would have been listening anyway.

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**TRY THIS 3.11**

Identify a “social problem” that you think is really no problem at all. Write two reassuring pages arguing your point. (Extra points for comedy.)

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**FICTION**

**THOMAS MCGUANE**

**Cowboy**

The old fella makes me go into the house in my stocking feet. The old lady’s in a big chair next to the window. In fact, the whole room is full of big chairs, but she’s only in one of them—though, big as she is, she could fill up several. The old man says, “I found this one in the loose-horse pen at the sale yard.”
She says, “What’s he supposed to be?”
He says, “Supposed to be a cowboy.”
“What’s he doin’ in the loose horses?”
I says, “I was lookin’ for one that would ride.”
“You was in the wrong pen, son,” the old man says. “Them’s canners. They’re goin’ to France in cardboard boxes.”
“Soon as they get a steel bolt in the head.” The big old gal laughs in her chair.
Now I’m sore. “There’s five in there broke to death. I rode ’em with nothin’ but binder twine.”
“It don’t make a shit,” the old man says. “Ever’ one of them is goin’ to France.”
The old lady don’t believe me. “How’d you get in them loose horses to ride?”
“I went in there at night.”
The old lady says, “You one crazy cowboy, go in there in the dark. Them broncs kick your teeth down your throat. I suppose you tried them bareback?”
“Naw, I drug the saddle I usually ride at the Rose Bowl Parade.”
“You got a horse for that?”
“I got Trigger. We unstuffed him.”
The old lady addresses the old man. “He’s got a mouth on him. This much we know.”
“Maybe he can tell us what good he is.”
I says, “I’m a cowboy.”
“You’re a outta-work cowboy.”
“It’s a dying way of life.”
“She’s about like me—she’s wondering if this ranch’s supposed to be some kinda welfare agency for cowboys.”
I’ve had enough. “You’re the dumb honyocker drove me out here.”
I think that’ll be the end of it, but the old lady says, “Don’t get huffy. You got the job. You against conversation or something?”
We get outside and the old sumbitch says, “You drawed lucky there, son. That last deal could’ve pissed her off.”
“It didn’t make me no nevermind if it did or didn’t.”
“She hadn’t been well. Used to she was sweet as pudding.”
“I’m sorry for that. We don’t have health, we don’t have nothin’.”

She must have been afflicted something terrible, because she was ugly morning, noon, and night for as long as she lasted—she’d pick a fight over nothing, and the old sumbitch got the worst of it. I felt sorry for him, little slack as he cut me.

Had a hundred seventy-five sweet-tempered horned Herefords and fifteen sleepy bulls. Shipped the calves all over for hybrid vigor, mostly to the South. Had some go clear to Florida. A Hereford that still had its horns was a walking miracle, and the old sumbitch had a smart little deal going. I soon learned to give him credit for such things, and the old lady barking commands offen the
sofa weren’t no slouch neither. Anybody else seen their books might’ve said they could be wintering in Phoenix.

They didn’t have no bunkhouse, just a LeisureLife mobile home that had lost its wheels about thirty years ago, and they had it positioned by the door of the barn so it’d be convenient for the hired man to stagger out at all hours and fight breech births and scours and any other disorder sent us by the cow gods. We had some doozies. One heifer got pregnant, and her calf was near as big as she was. Had to reach in with a saw and take it out in pieces. When we threw the head out on the ground, she turned to it and lowed like it was her baby. Everything a cow does is designed to turn it into meat as fast as possible so that somebody can eat it. It’s a terrible life.

The old sumbitch and I got along good. We got through calving and got to see them pairs and bulls run out onto the new grass. Nothing like seeing all that meat feel a little temporary joy. Then we bladed out the corrals and watched them dry under the spring sun at long last. Only mishap was when the manure spreader threw a rock and knocked me senseless and I drove the rig into an irrigation ditch. The old sumbitch never said a word but chained up and pulled us out with his Ford.

We led his cavvy out of the hills afoot with two buckets of sweet feed. Had a little of everything, including a blue roan I fancied, but he said it was a Hancock and bucked like the National Finals in Las Vegas, kicking out behind and squalling, and was just a man-killer, “Stick to the bays,” he said. “The West was won on a bay horse.”

He picked out three bays, had a keg of shoes, all ones and oughts, and I shod them best I could, three geldings with nice manners, stood good to shoe. About all you could say about the others was they had four legs each, and a couple, all white-marked from saddle galls and years of hard work, looked like no more summers after this. They’d been rode many a long mile. We chased ’em back into the hills and the three shod ones whinnied and fretted. “Back to work,” the old sumbitch says to them.

We shod three ’cause one was going to pack a ton of fencing supplies—barb wire, smooth wire, steel T-posts, old wore-out Sunflower fence stretchers that could barely grab on to the wire, and staples—and we was at it a good little while where the elk had knocked miles of it down, or the cedar finally give out and had to be replaced by steel. That was where I found out that the old sumbitch’s last good time was in Korea, where the officers at the front would yell over the radio, “Come on up here and die!” Said the enemy was coming in waves. Tells me all this while the stretcher’s pulling that wire squealing through the staples. The sumbitch was a tough old bastard. “They killed a pile of us and we killed a pile of them.” Squeak.

We hauled the mineral horseback, too, in panniers—white salt and iodine salt. He didn’t have no use for blocks, so we hauled it in sacks and poured it into the troughs he had on all these bald hilltops where the wind would blow away
the flies. Most of his so-called troughs were truck tires nailed onto anything flat—plywood, old doors, and suchlike—but they worked good. A cow can put her tongue anywhere in a tire and get what she needs, and you can drag one of them flat things with your horse if you need to move it. Most places we salted had old buffalo wallers where them buffalo wallered. They done wallered their last—had to get out of the way for the cow and the man on the bay horse.

I’d been rustling my own grub in the LeisureLife for quite some time when the old lady said it was time for me to eat with the white folks. This was not necessarily a good thing. The old lady’s knee replacements had begun to fail, and both me and the old sumbitch was half-afraid of her. She cooked as good as ever, but she was a bomb waiting to go off, standing bowlegged at the stove and talking ugly about how much she did for us. When she talked, the old sumbitch would move his mouth as though he was saying the same words, and we had to keep from giggling, which wasn’t hard. For if the old lady caught us at that there’d a been hell to pay.

Both the old sumbitch and the old lady was heavy smokers, to where a oxygen bottle was in sight. So they joined a Smoke-Enders deal the Lutherans had, and this required them to put all their butts in a jar and wear the jar around their necks on a string. The old sumbitch liked this O.K. because he could just tap his ash right under his chin and not get it on the truck seat, but the more that thing filled up and hung around her neck the meaner the old lady got. She had no idea the old sumbitch was cheating and setting his jar on the woodpile when we was working outside. She was just more honest than him, and in the end she give up smoking and he smoked away, except he wasn’t allowed to smoke in the house no more, nor buy ready-mades, ’cause the new tax made them too expensive and she wouldn’t let him take it out of the cows, which come first. She said it was just a vice and if he was half the man she thought he was he’d give it up as a bad deal.

“You could have a long and happy old age,” she said, real sarcastic-like.

One day me and the old sumbitch is in the house hauling soot out of the fireplace, on account of they had a chimbley fire last winter. Over the mantel is a picture of a beautiful woman in a red dress with her hair piled on top of her head. The old sumbitch tells me that’s the old lady before she joined the motorcycle gang.

“Oh?”

“Them motorcycle gangs,” he says, “all they do is eat and work on their motorcycles. They taught her to smoke, too, but she’s shut of that. Probably outlive us all.”

“Looks to me she can live long as she wants.”

“And if she ever wants to box you, tell her no. She’ll knock you on your ass. I guarantee it. Throw you a damn haymaker, son.”

I couldn’t understand how he could be so casual-like about the old lady being in a motorcycle gang. When we was smoking in the LeisureLife, I asked
him about it. That’s when I found out that him and the old lady was brother and sister. I guess that explained it. If your sister wants to join a motorcycle gang, that’s her business. He said she even had a tattoo—“Hounds from Hell,” with a dog shooting flames out of his nostrils and riding a Harley.

That picture on the mantel kind of stayed in my mind, and I asked the old sumbitch if his sister’d ever had a boyfriend. Well, yes, quite a few, he told me, quite a damn few. “Our folks run them off. They was just after the land.”

He was going all around the baler hitting the zerks with his grease gun. “I had a lady friend myself. She’d do anything. Cook. Gangbusters with a snorty horse, and not too damn hard on the eyes. Sis run her off. Said she was just after the land. If she was, I never could see it. Anyway, went on down the road long time ago.”

Fall come around and when we brought the cavvy down two of them old-timers who’d worked so hard was lame. One was stifled, one was sweenied, and both had crippling quarter cracks. I thought they needed to be at the loose-horse sale, but the old sumbitch says, “No mounts of mine is gonna feed no Frenchman,” and that was that. So we made a hole, led the old-timers to the edge, and shot them with a elk rifle. First one didn’t know what hit him. Second one heard the shot and saw his buddy fall, and the old sumbitch had to chase him around to kill him. Then he sent me down the hole to get the halters back. Lifting those big heads was some chore.

I enjoyed eating in the big house that whole summer until the sister started giving me come-hither looks. They was fairly limited except those days when the old sumbitch was in town after supplies. Then she dialed it up and kind of brushed me every time she went past the table. There was always something special on the town days—a pie, maybe. I tried to think about the picture on the mantel, but it was impossible, even though I knew it might get me out of the LeisureLife once and for all. She was getting more and more wound up, while I was pretending to enjoy the food or going crazy over the pie. But she didn’t buy it—called me a queer and sent me back to the trailer to make my own meals. By calling me a queer, she more or less admitted what she’d been up to, and I think that embarrassed her, because she covered up by roaring at everyone and everything, including the poor old sumbitch, who had no idea what had gone sideways while he was away. It was two years before she made another pie, and then it was once a year on my birthday. She made me five birthday pies in all—sand cherry, every one of them.

I broke the catch colt, which I didn’t know was no colt, as he was the biggest snide in the cavvy. He was four, and it was time. I just got around him for a couple of days, then saddled him gently as I could. The offside stirrup scared him, and he looked over at it, but that was all it was to saddling. I must’ve had a burst of courage, ’cause next minute I was on him. That was O.K., too. I told the
old sumbitch to open the corral gate, and we sailed away. The wind blew his tail up under him, and he thought about bucking but rejected the idea and that was about all they was to breaking Olly, for that was his name. Once I’d rode him two weeks, he was safe for the old sumbitch, who plumb loved this new horse and complimented me generously for the job I’d did.

We had three hard winters in a row, then lost so many calves to scours we changed our calving grounds. The old sumbitch just come out one day and looked at where he’d calved out for fifty years and said, “The ground’s no good. We’re movin.” So we spent the summer building a new corral way off down the creek. When we’s finished, he says, “I meant to do this when I got back from overseas and now it’s finished and I’m practically done for, too. Whoever gets the place next will be glad his calves don’t shit themselves into the next world like mine done.”

Neither one of us had a back that was worth a damn, and the least we could do was get rid of the square baler and quit hefting them man-killing five-wire bales. We got a round baler and a DewEze machine that let us pick up a bale from the truck without laying a finger on it. We’d tell stories and smoke in the cab on those cold winter days and roll out a thousand pounds of hay while them old-time horned Herefords followed the truck. That’s when I let him find out I’d done some time.

“I figured you musta been in the crowbar hotel.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, you’re a pretty good hand. What’s a pretty good hand doin’ tryin’ loose horses in the middle of the night at some Podunk sale yard? Folks hang on to a pretty good hand, and nobody was hangin’ on to you. You want to tell me what you done?”

I’d been with the old sumbitch for three years and out of jail the same amount of time. I wasn’t afraid to tell him what I done ’cause I had started to trust him, but I sure didn’t want him telling nothing to his sister. I told him I rustled some yearlings, and he chuckled like he understood entirely. I had rustled some yearlings, all right, but that’s not what I went up for.

The old man paid me in cash, or, rather, the old lady did, since she handled anything like that. They never paid into workmen’s comp, and there was no reason to go to the records. They didn’t even have my name right. You tell people around here your name is Shane, and they’ll always believe you. The important thing is I was working my tail off for that old sumbitch, and he knew it. Nothing else mattered, even the fact that we’d come to like each other. After all, this was a goddamn ranch.

The old fella had several peculiarities to him, most of which I’ve forgotten. He was one of the few fellas I ever heard of who would actually jump up and down on his hat if he got mad enough. You can imagine what his hat looked like. One time he did it ’cause I let the swather get away from me on a hill and bent it all to hell. Another time a Mormon tried to run down his breeding program to
get a better deal on some replacement heifers, and I’ll be damned if the old sumbitch didn’t throw that hat down and jump on it, right in front of the Mormon, causing the Mormon to get into his Buick and ease on down the road without another word. One time when we was driving ring shanks into corral poles I hit my thumb and tried jumping on my hat, but the old sumbitch gave me such an odd look I never tried it again.

The old lady died sitting down. I went in, and there she was, sitting down, and she was dead. After the first wave of grief, the old sumbitch and me fretted about rigor mortis and not being able to move her in that seated position. So we stretched her onto the couch and called the mortician and he called the coroner and for some reason the coroner called the ambulance, which caused the old sumbitch to state, “It don’t do you no nevermind to tell nobody nothing.” Course he was right.

Once the funeral was behind us, I moved out of the LeisureLife, partly for comfort and partly ’cause the old sumbitch falled apart after his sister passed, which I never would’ve suspected. Once she’s gone, he says, he’s all that’s left of his family and he’s alone in life, and about then he notices me and tells me to get my stuff out of the LeisureLife and move in with him.

We rode through the cattle pritnear ever’ day year round, and he come to trust me enough to show how his breeding program went, with culls and breed-backs and outcrosses and replacements, and took me to bull sales and showed me what to expect in a bull and which ones were correct and which were sorry. One day we’s looking at a pen of yearling bulls on this outfit near Luther and he can’t make up his mind and he says he wished his sister was with him and he starts snuffling and says she had an eye on her wouldn’t quit. So I stepped up and picked three bulls out of that pen, and he quit snuffling and said damn if I didn’t have an eye on me, too. That was the beginning of our partnership.

One whole year I was the cook, and one whole year he was the cook, and back and forth like that, but never at the same time. Whoever was cook would change when the other fella got sick of his recipes, and ever once in a while a new recipe would come in the AgriNews, like that corn chowder with the sliced hot dogs. I even tried a pie one time, but it just made him lonesome for days gone by, so we forgot about desserts, which was probably good for our health, as most sweets call for gobbing in the white sugar.

The sister never let him have a dog ’cause she had a cat and she thought a dog would get the cat. It wasn’t much of a cat, anyhow, but it lived a long time, outlived the old lady by several moons. After it passed on, we took it out to the burn barrel and the first thing the old sumbitch said was “We’re gettin’ a dog.” It took him that long to realize that his sister was gone.

Tony was a Border collie we got as a pup from a couple in Miles City that raised them. You could cup your hands and hold Tony when we got him, but he grew up in one summer and went to work and we taught him “down,” “here,”
“come by,” “way to me,” and “hold ’em,” all in one year or less, ’cause Tony would just stay on his belly and study you with his eyes until he knew exactly what you wanted. Tony helped us gather, mother up pairs, and separate bulls, and he lived in the house for many a good year and kept us entertained with all his tricks. Finally, Tony grew old and died. We didn’t take it so good, especially the old sumbitch, who said he couldn’t foresee enough summers for another dog. Plus that was the year he couldn’t get on a horse no more and he wasn’t about to work no stock dog afoot. There was still plenty to do and most of it fell to me. After all, this was a goddamn ranch.

The time had come to tell him why I went to jail and what I did, which was rob that little store at Absarokee and shoot the proprietor, though he didn’t die. I had no idea why I did such a thing—then or now. I led the crew on the prison ranch for a number of years and turned out many a good hand. They wasn’t nearabout to let me loose until there was a replacement good as me who’d stay awhile. So I trained up a murderer from Columbia Falls, could rope, break horses, keep vaccine records, fence, and irrigate. Once the warden seen how good he was, they paroled me out and turned it all over to the new man, who was never getting out. The old sumbitch could give a shit less when I told him my story. I could’ve told him all this years before when he first hired me, for all he cared. He was a big believer in what he saw with his own eyes.

I don’t think I ever had the touch with customers the old sumbitch had. They’d come from all over looking for horned Herefords and talking hybrid vigor, which I may or may not have believed. They’d ask what we had and I’d point to the corrals and say, “Go look for yourself.” Some would insist on seeing the old sumbitch, and I’d tell them he was in bed, which was pritnear the only place you could find him now that he’d begun to fail. Then the state got wind of his condition and took him to town. I went to see him there right regular, but it just upset him. He couldn’t figure out who I was and got frustrated ’cause he knew I was somebody he was supposed to know. And then he failed even worse. The doctors told me it was just better if I didn’t come round.

The neighbors claimed I was personally responsible for the spread of spurge, Dalmatian toadflax, and knapweed. They got the authorities involved and it was pretty clear that I was the weed they had in mind. If they could get the court to appoint one of their relatives ranch custodian while the old sumbitch was in storage they’d get all that grass for free till he was in a pine box. The authorities came in all sizes and shapes, but when they were through they let me take one saddle horse, one saddle, the clothes on my back, my hat, and my slicker. I rode that horse clear to the sale yard, where they tried to put him in the loose horses ’cause of his age. I told them I was too set in my ways to start feeding Frenchmen and rode off toward Idaho. There’s always an opening for a cowboy, even a old sumbitch like me if he can halfway make a hand.
The line consists of an infinite number of points; the plane, of an infinite number of lines; the volume, of an infinite number of planes; the hypervolume, of an infinite number of volumes...No—this, more geometrico, is decidedly not the best way to begin my tale. To say that the story is true is by now a convention of every fantastic tale; mine, nevertheless, is true.

I live alone, in a fifth-floor apartment on Calle Belgrano. One evening a few months ago, I heard a knock at my door. I opened it, and a stranger stepped in. He was a tall man, with blurred, vague features, or perhaps my nearsightedness made me see him that way. Everything about him spoke of honest poverty: he was dressed in gray, and carried a gray valise. I immediately sensed that he was a foreigner. At first I thought he was old; then I noticed that I had been misled by his sparse hair, which was blond, almost white, like the Scandinavians'. In the course of our conversation, which I doubt lasted more than an hour, I learned that he hailed from the Orkneys.

I pointed the man to a chair. He took some time to begin talking. He gave off an air of melancholy, as I myself do now.

"I sell Bibles," he said at last.

"In this house," I replied, not without a somewhat stiff, pedantic note, "there are several English Bibles, including the first one, Wyclif's. I also have Cipriano de Valera's, Luther's (which is, in literary terms, the worst of the lot), and a Latin copy of the Vulgate. As you see, it isn't exactly Bibles I might be needing."

After a brief silence he replied.

"It's not only Bibles I sell. I can show you a sacred book that might interest a man such as yourself. I came by it in northern India, in Bikaner."

He opened his valise and brought out the book. He laid it on the table. It was a clothbound octavo volume that had clearly passed through many hands. I examined it; the unusual heft of it surprised me. On the spine was printed Holy Writ, and then Bombay.

"Nineteenth century, I'd say," I observed.

"I don't know," was the reply. "Never did know."

I opened it at random. The characters were unfamiliar to me. The pages, which seemed worn and badly set, were printed in double columns, like a Bible. The text was cramped, and composed into versicles. At the upper corner of each page were Arabic numerals. I was struck by an odd fact: the even-numbered page would carry the number 40,514, let us say, while the odd-numbered page that followed it would be 999. I turned the page; the next page bore an eight-digit number. It also bore a small illustration, like those one sees in dictionaries: an anchor drawn in pen and ink, as though by the unskilled hand of a child.
It was at that point that the stranger spoke again.
“Look at it well. You will never see it again.”
There was a threat in the words, but not in the voice.
I took note of the page, and then closed the book. Immediately I opened it again. In vain I searched for the figure of the anchor, page after page. To hide my discomfiture, I tried another tack.
“This is a version of Scripture in some Hindu language, isn’t that right?”
“No,” he replied.
Then he lowered his voice, as though entrusting me with a secret.
“I came across this book in a village on the plain, and I traded a few rupees and a Bible for it. The man who owned it didn’t know how to read. I suspect he saw the Book of Books as an amulet. He was of the lowest caste; people could not so much as step on his shadow without being defiled. He told me his book was called the Book of Sand because neither sand nor this book has a beginning or an end.”
He suggested I try to find the first page.
I took the cover in my left hand and opened the book, my thumb and forefinger almost touching. It was impossible: several pages always lay between the cover and my hand. It was as though they grew from the very book.
“Now try to find the end.”
I failed there as well.
“This can’t be,” I stammered, my voice hardly recognizable as my own.
“It can’t be, yet it is,” The Bible peddler said, his voice little more than a whisper. “The number of pages in this book is literally infinite. No page is the first page; no page is the last. I don’t know why they’re numbered in this arbitrary way, but perhaps it’s to give one to understand that the terms of an infinite series can be numbered any way whatever.”
Then, as though thinking out loud, he went on.
“If space is infinite, we are anywhere, at any point in space. If time is infinite, we are at any point in time.”
His musings irritated me.
“You,” I said, “are a religious man, are you not?”
“Yes, I’m Presbyterian. My conscience is clear. I am certain I didn’t cheat that native when I gave him the Lord’s Word in exchange for his diabolic book.”
I assured him he had nothing to reproach himself for, and asked whether he was just passing through the country. He replied that he planned to return to his own country within a few days. It was then that I learned he was a Scot, and that his home was in the Orkneys. I told him I had great personal fondness for Scotland because of my love for Stevenson and Hume.
“And Robbie Burns,” he corrected.
As we talked I continued to explore the infinite book.
“Had you intended to offer this curious specimen to the British Museum, then?” I asked with feigned indifference.
“No,” he replied, “I am offering it to you,” and he mentioned a great sum of money.
I told him, with perfect honesty, that such an amount of money was not within my ability to pay. But my mind was working; in a few moments I had devised my plan.

“I propose a trade,” I said. “You purchased the volume with a few rupees and the Holy Scripture; I will offer you the full sum of my pension, which I have just received, and Wyclif’s black-letter Bible. It was left to me by my parents.”

“A black-letter Wyclif!” he murmured.

I went to my bedroom and brought back the money and the book. With a bibliophile’s zeal he turned the pages and studied the binding.

“Done,” he said.

I was astonished that he did not haggle. Only later was I to realize that he had entered my house already determined to sell the book. He did not count the money, but merely put the bills into his pocket.

We chatted about India, the Orkneys, and the Norwegian jarls that had once ruled those islands. Night was falling when the man left. I have never seen him since, nor do I know his name.

I thought of putting the Book of Sand in the space left by the Wyclif, but I chose at last to hide it behind some imperfect volumes of the Thousand and One Nights.

I went to bed but could not sleep. At three or four in the morning I turned on the light. I took out the impossible book and turned its pages. On one, I saw an engraving of a mask. There was a number in the corner of the page—I don’t remember now what it was—raised to the ninth power.

I showed no one my treasure. To the joy of possession was added the fear that it would be stolen from me, and to that, the suspicion that it might not be truly infinite. Those two points of anxiety aggravated my already habitual misanthropy. I had but few friends left, and those, I stopped seeing. A prisoner of the Book, I hardly left my house. I examined the worn binding and the covers with a magnifying glass, and rejected the possibility of some artifice. I found that the small illustrations were spaced at two-thousand-page intervals. I began noting them down in an alphabetized notebook, which was very soon filled. They never repeated themselves. At night, during the rare intervals spared me by insomnia, I dreamed of the book.

Summer was drawing to a close, and I realized that the book was monstrous. It was cold consolation to think that I, who looked upon it with my eyes and fondled it with my ten flesh-and-bone fingers, was no less monstrous than the book. I felt it was a nightmare thing, an obscene thing, and that it defiled and corrupted reality.

I considered fire, but I feared that the burning of an infinite book might be similarly infinite, and suffocate the planet in smoke.

I remembered reading once that the best place to hide a leaf is in the forest. Before my retirement I had worked in the National Library, which contained nine hundred thousand books; I knew that to the right of the lobby a curving staircase descended into the shadows of the basement, where the maps and periodicals are kept. I took advantage of the librarians’ distraction to hide the Book of Sand on
Kong Looks Back on His Tryout with the Bears

If it had worked out, I’d be on a train to Green Bay, not crawling up this building with the air corps on my ass. And if it weren’t for love, I’d drop this shrieking little bimbo sixty stories and let them take me back to the exhibit, let them teach me to rumba and do imitations. They tried me on the offensive line, told me to take out the right cornerback for Nagurski. Eager to please, I wadded up the whole secondary, then stomped the line, then the bench and locker room, then the east end of town, to the river. But they were not pleased: they said I had to learn my position, become a team player. The great father Bear himself said that, so I tried hard to know the right numbers and how the arrows slanted toward the little o’s. But the o’s and the wet grass and the grunts drowned out the count, and the tight little cheers drew my arrow straight into the stands, and the wives tasted like flowers and raw fish. So I was put on waivers right after camp, and here I am, panty sniffer, about to die a clown, who once opened a hole you could drive Nebraska through.
TRY THIS 3.13
Write from the point of view of anything not human—an insect, an android, a potato, a belly button. Try to invent and develop a diction that represents the frame of reference of this thing. For instance, if you are writing from the point of view of a shoe, it is likely to have extensive knowledge of and opinions about flooring, but a limited concept of the sky or human heads.

SIÂN B. GRIFFITHS
Fistful

The dead can be very useful sometimes.
Clint Eastwood, A Fistful of Dollars

Sometimes, it’s all about how you wear your poncho, or the layering of dust on your boots.

or how you sit a bucking mule
while five men scoff from a high-barred gate.

Where words unhinge from speaking mouths,
it’s useful to be the man with no name
or the dark-eyed woman, clamped in a locket that laments its own opening.

Engineer the corpses,
and the dead are only sleeping,
secrets ever-burning on their cold parched lips.

All the Winchesters, all the Remingtons,
all the six guns unholstered in this border town
are not enough to kill the dead;
their stories hide in the sheepskin vests
of the nameless living.

MATT BONDURANT
The Pathos of Charles Schulz

The clearest example the spelling-bee episode,
Charlie Brown traveling to “the big city”

with Snoopy on an empty bus,
a small child and beagle on public transit.

In the final round, to win the whole thing,
Charlie gets B-E-A-G-L-E.
Snoopy blinks twice, in his seat deep among children. Charlie fumbles, sweats. He can’t do it.

Riding the bus back with the moon in the window
the color and shape of a cashew nut,

the texture of a lemon slice, a wedge of pear,
shining in a pallid shaft on the two companions

as they travel over the river toward home.
Snoopy plays a mournful tune on his mouth-harp

as Charlie looks out the window.
Nobody says anything.

At home, Chuck goes into the pale light of the kitchen
and fixes himself a bowl of cold cereal,

his broad face quiet, his orange-on-a-stick-head bowed,
sitting at the kitchen table in the middle of the night,

spooning soggy flakes into his mouth.
Snoopy lies on top of his doghouse and stares up at the stars.

Woodstock flutters from the heavens
to rest on his distended puppy-belly.

This is no gift of resolve or insight,
no cartoonish god-machine,

no possibility, for any of us, to rid ourselves
of this one simple thing.

**TRY THIS 3.14**
Write a poem about a movie, a cartoon strip, or a pop song. As the persona of the poet, you will be making a different point than the film, strip, or song.

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**BARBARA HAMBY**

**Ode to American English**

I was missing English one day, American, really,

with its pill-popping Hungarian goulash of everything
from Anglo-Saxon to Zulu, because British English

is not the same, if the paperback dictionary

is any indication, too cultured by half. Oh, the English
know their dahlias, but what about doowop, donuts,

Dick Tracy, Tricky Dick? With their elegant Oxfordian
accents, how could they understand my yearning for the hotrod, hotdog, hot flash vocabulary of the U. S. of A.,
the fragmented fandango of Dagwood's everyday flattening of Mr. Beasley on the sidewalk, fetuses floating
on billboards, drive-by monster hip-hop stereotypes shaking the windows of my dining room like a 7.5 earthquake,
Ebonics, Spanglish, “you know” used as comma and period, the inability of 90% of the population to get the present perfect:
I have went, I have saw, I have tooken Jesus into my heart,
the battle cry of the Bible Belt, but no one uses
the King James anymore, only plain-speak versions, in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says,
“Dude, wake up,” and the L-man bolts up like a B-movie mummy. “Whoa, I was toasted.” Yes, ma'am,
I miss the mongrel plentitude of American English, its fall-guy, rat-terrier, dog-pound neologisms, the bomb of it all,
the rushing River Jordan backwoods mutability of it, the low-rider, boom-box cruise of it, from New Joisey to Ha-wah-ya
with its sly dog, malasada-scarfing beach blanket lingo to the ubiquitous Valley Girl's like-like stuttering,
shopaholic rant. I miss its quotidian beauty, its querulous back-biting righteous indignation, its preening rotgut
flag-waving cowardice. Suffering Succotash, sputters Sylvester the Cat, sine die, say the pork-bellied legislators of the swamps and plains. I miss all those guys, their Tweety-bird resilience, their Doris Day optimism, the candid unguent of utter unhappiness on every channel, the midnight televangelist euphoric stew, the junk mail, voice mail vernacular.
On every boulevard and rue I miss the Tarzan cry of Johnny Weismueller, Johnny Cash, Johnny B. Goode,
and all the smart-talking, gum-snapping hard-girl dialogue, finger-popping x-rated street talk, sports babble,
Cheetoes, Cheerios, chili dog diatribes. Yeah, I miss them all, sitting here on my sidewalk throne sipping champagne verses lined up like hearses, metaphors juking, nouns zipping in my head like Corvettes on Dxedrine, French verbs slitting my throat, yearning for James Dean to jump my curb.

TRY THIS 3.15
An ode is a serious, meditative lyric poem that treats a noble subject in a dignified manner. Write an ode to something hip, pop, trivial, or trashy that you really love.
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 fella, 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 fella 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 fella he looked real sharp at the burger and a bunch more ants marched on out nice as you please and his head lolled 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’ blinkin’. ‘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 Pharoahs. 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. Noooooooooo, you can’t die in a McDonald’s no matter how hard you try. It’s the spices. Seals you safe in this life like it seals in the flavor. Yessssssss, yes!

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.

Blackout

TRY THIS 3.16

A prop is a kind of significant detail for the stage. The props in Jane Martin’s French Fries are subordinated to the voice of the character, but with a little imagination you can see how the actress might make use of the cup, a hamburger, fries, the newspapers, and her glasses. Write a short monologue in which a character reveals himself/herself through voice, and also through relation to an object onstage.
WORKING TOWARD A DRAFT

Take a poem or fragment of a poem you have written and recast it in the second person. Who is the “you” to whom this poem might be addressed? How does using the second person alter the meaning?

Or:

Take a passage from your journal and rewrite it in the voice of Oscar Wilde, Pocahontas, Miss Manners, Donald Trump, Donald Duck, Hannah Montana, Jack Bauer, Annie Oakley, or The Godfather. Read it aloud to your group without telling them which of these possibilities you have chosen. Can they identify the voice? Does the exercise complicate or develop your ideas about the passage?