CHAPTER ONE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Composing Your Artist Soul

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

CHAPTER TWO

Truth and Memory, Truth in Memory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Commit to Memory

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

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

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

Imagination, Speculation, and Perhapsing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Follow-Up Memory Exercise: Perhapsing

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

Pictures of You

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Get the Picture?

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

Research and History

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Curiouser and Curiouser

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

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

Exercise: A Personal Prehistory

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

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

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

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

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

On the Ground

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: The Road Less Traveled By

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

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

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

In the News

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

Writing Environments

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Take A Hike

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

The Literature of Place

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Going Places

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

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

Exercise: Animal Magnetism

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

Other Places

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

As mentioned above, writing good creative nonfiction about a place does not need to involve visiting the wilderness. In fact, some place writing captures the experience of living in the city.

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

CHAPTER FIVE

Notes on Style

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: A Matter of Form

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Syntax

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: The Grammar of Style

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

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

Maya Kapoor, "Memory Snags"

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

Kim Groninga, "Knot and Pull"

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

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

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

Traci Brimhall, "Philematophilia"

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

Sofia Samatar, "The Unknown Country"

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

Tyler Dunning, "Steel Reflections"

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

Andrew Jones, "Recipe for Reloading"

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

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

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

Whitney Curry Wimbish, "Bloodletting"

Show and Tell

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIX

Figurative Language

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Metaphorical Thinking

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

Imagery and the Senses

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

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

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

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

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

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

Exercise: Sensory Filters

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

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

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

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

I tasted the bitterness of the aspirin.

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

Smell

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

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

Freewriting questions

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

Taste

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

Freewriting questions

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

Touch

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

Freewriting questions

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

Sound

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

Freewriting questions

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

Sight

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

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

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

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

Freewriting questions

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

Synaesthesia

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

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

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

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

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

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

Freewriting questions

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

CHAPTER EIGHT

Writing the Body

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

The Illness Memoir

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

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

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

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

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

Freewriting Prompt

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

Body Image

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

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

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

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

Freewriting Prompt

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

Braided Bodies

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

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

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

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

Freewriting Prompt

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

Other Bodies

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

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

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

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

Freewriting Prompt

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

CHAPTER NINE

Forms

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

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

Flash Nonfiction

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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

The Braided Essay

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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

The Lyric Essay

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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

The Hermit Crab Essay

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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

The List

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

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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

Experiments on the Page

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

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

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

Writing Prompt

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