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NONFICTION

Memoir, Journalism, and Creative Nonfiction Exercises
from Today's Best Writers and Teachers

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Prompt 6

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Landscape and Memory

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designed this nature-writing exercise for undergraduates, but I have used it with writers of all ages to help them get over the tendency to think of Nature, capitalized, as some lofty abstraction, and to bring their observations down to earth, literally, while employing a voice that is uniquely theirs. Switch the topic from the self to a nonurban landscape and the memoirist who normally crafts prose with grace and wit may, at first, sound stiff or falsely reverent, partly because she feels out of her element, genre-wise, or perhaps because she has been reading deep ecology and has persuaded herself that a human being can only be an intruder on this earth. Even the most accomplished writers can find themselves falling back on stock similes or overly general observations, especially in places they don't know well.

I understand these writers' discomforts because I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, in the sixties, when our rivers were so polluted that one actually burst into flames; my apprenticeship to the natural world began long after I'd left home. It is helpful sometimes for me to remember that nature writers have to do research like everybody else. They learn as they go. When Annie Dillard was writing *Pilgrim*

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at *Tinker Creek* she spent her days outside in rural Virginia—walking, sitting, observing, taking field notes—but she spent her evenings holed up at the library. And whether she is describing an Osage orange tree, a frog, a weasel, or a solar eclipse, she is always mining her own memories for personal stories that make the prose uniquely *hers*.

This exercise allows the writer at any level and of any temperament, inspired or reluctant, focused or distracted, to simply sit in a place, observe it, describe it in detail, and work with the memories that surface, integrating them into the prose rather than resisting them. Don't be surprised if what results is difficult to categorize: Is this a nature essay, a memoir, a personal meditation, or all of the above? The goal is simply to free the writer to be herself on the page, watching and remembering.

EXERCISE

Go walk in a natural setting, find a comfortable spot, and try, weather permitting, to stay at least an hour sitting by yourself. Spend some time taking in your surroundings before you start writing. As you settle in you might, at first, be more aware of the thoughts and worries that followed you onto the trail than what is actually before you. You might want to close your eyes for a minute and listen to the sounds around you while you also pay attention to your breath. Listen to your heart beating; listen to the birdsong, wind, water. Inhale the smells of vegetation and water. Open your eyes and note the palette of colors and textures of the sand, trees, birds, rocks, tracks—animal and human. There is so much life to take in before you even lift your pen!

Now, draw a sketch of what's around you. You may want to try two sketches from two vantage points: the larger scene you are facing, and a small ecosystem near your feet against which you are a

giant. Even if drawing is something you never do, making these sketches will give you a sense of your place in the landscape and the relationships between the other elements of the landscape.

When you are ready to write, you may want to begin by simply taking notes on what you see, hear, and smell close at hand. If you know the names of things, write them down. Be specific. Capture what you heard with your eyes closed and what you hear now, waves or birdsong or wind or branches creaking or leaves crunching under other people's boots. Record details that will help you remember the scene later, but don't feel obliged just yet to write in complete sentences. Key words and descriptive phrases will do. What's in the drawing? If the sketch is like a map, what are the landmarks on it?

After you have a page of vivid phrases and key words to work with as a kind of imagery bank, start a new page. Now, as you begin writing your rough draft, try starting with a simple "you are here" map that tells the reader exactly where you are. Think of the reader from outside your world of geographical givens. For example, *I am sitting beneath a willow tree on the banks of the Grass River, in northern New York, watching a great blue heron land across the river.* Look at your imagery bank, your sketches, and work in some of this material. Write for half an hour or more without editing yourself. If memories come, unusual associations, abstract thoughts or personal feelings, feel free to include the ones that seem most compelling. No matter how hard you try to stay in the present moment your mind will wander, so just let it happen and follow the trail. Nudge yourself back to the present now and then, recording what you are seeing now, in the present scene, when you do.

If a number of memories have surfaced, find a trigger from within the scene itself that allows you to explore one of the memories that came up in greater detail. That memory might be something you develop into a short scene in past tense. Example: *As I watch the heron swoop down, I remember the time Loraina tried to teach*

me to dance the tango. We had just come back from dinner, and . . . The memory can be a related nature story or something else, a scene from your life.

When you're ready, find a link back to the present scene and end your draft with something that happens now, in today's encounter with the natural world.

When you're ready, find a quiet place indoors to transform your material—sketches, random notes, stream-of-consciousness writing, memories, and what ultimately emerged as a draft—into a short essay. As a first port of call, you may want to consult a nature guide. Look at your sketch of trees and wildflowers and other vegetation or animal prints in the snow and try to match what is unknown to you with what you can find in the guides so that your prose won't be too general. Words like "tree" and "bird" don't create the specific pictures for the reader that "willow" and "blue heron" do. As you retrieve more of these specifics, pay attention as well to the musicality of language. Read what you have written out loud and notice when the voice pleases you, and when it gets in the way of what you're trying to say. Now you're ready to distill, develop, shape. When you were sitting outside writing, a number of disparate sensory impressions and memories may have emerged. As you revise, you will most likely need to cut some and expand others so that the essay coheres into something whole. What did you see today, perhaps for the first time? What hidden kinship did you uncover today between yourself, your past, and what you have just so vividly observed?