

Prompt 8: Road Songs

Option A: Have you been abroad? Inspired by the writing of Pico Iyer, take us to a favorite haunt of yours. Maybe it's just the place in Kenya where you got your breakfast snack of those green vegetables on a chapatti. Maybe it was the coffeehouse in London where you went to study and write in your journal. Maybe it was the bar in Australia where you met that guy. Have you spent time living in a yurt of a cabin in the middle of the nowhere that is actually somewhere very vivid? Take us there.

Option B: Or take us to somewhere interesting where you are spending your Midsemester break. Give us the feel of the place. Write in a way that appeals to the senses.

Here's a tip. Take yourself to a funky café, dog park, pedestrian district, biker bar, or wherever you can go with pen and notebook in hand to try to get the feel of the place. You might begin by making lists. You don't even need to write in complete sentences as you warm up. Begin, perhaps, as Frances Mayes starts in the paragraph below about her time in Portugal, with colors. You can begin lists with words and short phrases, prompted by each sense. Sometimes you might begin by doing a sketch.

Here's that example by Frances Mayes:

If I lived in Lisbon, I would choose to live here. . . Open this door and find the memory of a Muslim mathematician consulting his astrolabe, pass this walled garden and imagine the wives of the house gathered around the fountain under the mimosa. Easily, memory seeks a guitarist playing by moonlight at an upper window, a designer of tiles in a workshop, a child weaving on a doorstep, a sailor packing his duffel. The spirit of the Alfama feels close to the spirit of the artifacts of Lusitania that we saw on the first day. . .

Colors: Islamic turquoise, curry, coral, bone white, the blue layers of the sea. The scents of baking bread, wet stones, and fish frying at outdoor stands. The aromas of coriander and mint and big stews and roast pork emanating from the small neighborhood restaurants, the *tascas*. Menus of today's *prato do dia* are posted in the windows, and we choose a *tasca* with everyone seated together at crowded tables. As I write, I admire a walnut cake with caramel frosting served to a man across from us. He sees this and reaches over for my fork, handing me back a large bite of his dessert. The waiter brings platters of fish fried in a gossamer, crispy batter, and a spicy eggplant the old Moors would have loved. We are astonished. Here's the real local food. For dessert, old-fashioned baked apples are served to Ed, and to me a flan with cinnamon, a whiff of the Arabs. The bill—twenty euros, a fourth of what the guidebook restaurants cost, and ten times better.

The Alfama slows for afternoon. Music drifts from a window, not *fado*, not fateful, but a whiny Bob Dylan relic inviting a lady to lay across a big brass bed. Instead, a woman hangs her laundry on a balcony, her mouth full of green

plastic clothespins. Cheery old trams, red and yellow, play the main streets. At an antique shop I find blue and white tiles from the 1700s in dusty stacks around the floor. . . .

Lisbon, like San Francisco, inhabits the edge. The first or last edge? In California along the Pacific coast, I always have the sense that I'm perched on the sharp shoulder of the end of the country—nowhere else to go. On the other side of that cold ocean, waves break on far, adventitious shores. The harsh terrain of the California coast remains a lonely and wild beauty. Geographically, Lisbon feels quite opposite. From here the old navigators ventured south to Africa, around to India, and west, reaching both Newfoundland and Brazil by 1500. . . .

Option C: Errand

Take yourself on an errand run—to the post office, the store, the place you have to go to do the mundane thing. But make the trip mindfully. Imagine that you've been slaving over something difficult for hours and hours and this journey to deal with practical things feels like a vacation. Notice things you don't normally see. Look at the sidewalk, the trees, the signs. Imagine how it would look to someone who'd never been here before.

Read Emily Heistand's essay by the same name for inspiration and see if she can inspire you to make an afternoon or morning of getting basic things done in the world feel like an adventure.