

ASSIGNMENT # 1 Witch's Brew

The page is a unique ecosystem, distinct from film and theater. We write syllable by syllable and we say each word out loud. Sentences written for the silent eye inevitably lead to a linear and logical predictability. Writing for the ear opens a subterranean stratum of possibilities rising from sound, rhyme, repetition, refrains and rhythm. This region is by nature more original and surprising. The ancient is continuous. We know ourselves in votive-lit nights of chant and drums. The primal mouth opens in prayer accompanied by handclap and star-hewn thunder. We are composers and choreographers. A paragraph is a verbal amulet. We bleed gold.

Your assignment is to gather research from the actual world and write a landscape. The main character of your piece will be this landscape. As we are living in different and distinct regions, it is invaluable to know and render each with intimacy. Every town, harbor, meadow, bridge and desert that we know with specificity expands our writing repertoire. We exploit the physical environment with our psychology, a daring and ambition.

We will now carry a notebook dedicated to our landscape. Landscapes like characters are assembled from composites of real data presented with *attitude*. It is incumbent upon the writer to know a region with accuracy, its history and vegetation, climate and accents, violations and astonishments and render this knowledge with authority. Sunset is not generic. For the writer, nothing is generic. The sunsets in Hawaii and Arizona, Los Angeles and Mexico have defining characteristics like fingerprints.

When you describe a place, it must be with blood specificity. America has a tradition of regional identity. When you write of a certain street or beach, you make a commitment to the reader and your colleagues that you are not a transient or renter. Present a region as if you owned it.

Find a flow by dispensing with punctuation and Walking the Plank (i.e. placing commas where there should be periods) and you are forced to enter what has been closed and forbidden. By going further, by taking extra steps into the nothing you will write what you do not yet know. This is the heart of writing, discovery and revelation. In forcing yourself to write what you do not know, you invent a mouth and a reason.

In your landscape experiment, consider tropicalizing and feminizing the language itself. The English of literary tradition is angular like the trees of Hawthorne's dark forest. *He walked to the center of town where the square with its marble cathedral built like a monument beside the statue of the king.* If we substitute plaza for center, we've changed the trajectory and octave. Can you hear the difference between center and plaza? The word center is clipped and measured. Plaza has a dreamy flexibility suggesting waves and fluidity and what resists precise measurement. What was called the town is now a pueblo. And the edifice not a marble cathedral but? A church of adobe, yes.

Thus we have *She walks to the plaza where an adobe church rises like another species of jungle, like the bougainvillea and hibiscus between barefoot boys and goats*. By substituting words, we've altered the image and ideas. If we say the building rises rather than it is built, the church has the same qualities as vegetation, it grows, it's organic. The word species came from hearing the s's in the piece, specifically from the sounds of plaza and rises. But it's a word with a radically different history within it, implying evolution and change. We've let a hot wind of jungle orchids blow through the vertical spears.

The key substitution was *plaza*. There's an attitude inherent in the words and we changed it. The sentence was proceeding to a certain unquestionable destiny. We've taken assumptions presumed unalterable and subverted them. If our church rises organic, questions of ownership and trespass and laws and inheritance are a subtext.

We've further questioned, without using a punctuation mark, the classical hierarchies of western civilization. Marble is imported from the Old World and is a material of permanence. The wars of Europe seem to be about collecting marble. It is the stone we sculpt kings and god with. On the other hand, adobe is indigenous and comes from mud. It's a material that implies cycles. History punctuates itself by erecting monuments. We are questioning the foundation of such structures. Instead of a statue of a king, we've put barefoot boys with goats.

Yes, goats are a banned mammal. The point is that words carry a history with them, a system of how societies are divided and governed, how trespass is perceived and the meaning of property. By replacing the replica of a king with goats, we've upended the concept of divinity and dynasties and reinvented the universe.

Only a politics that is thoroughly integrated into you on a molecular level will work on the page. It is not a matter of intentions. The page will reject overt political themes, issues, anecdotes and personal accounts. If you truly inhabit your philosophy, it will surface on the page naturally. The fiction comes first and the political will emerge. It will be instinctual in your selections from a substratum indigenous to your personality.

The creative writer needs no visas, no benedictions, no recitation of credit card numbers, permission slips or baggage claim receipts. Mrs. Johnson, who embedded the rules of subject noun agreement and made the coma a trauma, can't sign our hall pass because she's dead. And moving characters through space and time can be accomplished with a single word.

In *Lesbos*, your absolutely required reading assignment, the Plath persona is boiling potatoes. She observes a neighbor's yard from her window. And her toddler has a fit that she finds horrifying. The Plath persona's disgust with her son's screaming until his face is distorted and hideous is a response they're still hammering nails into her palms for. Apparently the good mother automatically transforms all her children's behaviors into endearing manifestations. That is it. The rest of the poem, it's nearly 3 pages, is free association.

Please note that writers do not actually produce passages of free association. That's a concept from literary criticism that is not well understood. Writers consort with the page to generate the *illusion* of free association. Free association unto itself has no intrinsic value. It's like trying to get extra points because the event described is actual. The novice's mantra of *but it really happened*. We take free association and filter, embellish, restructure and excise the raw scrawl of real thought and make it literary.

While the Plath persona boils potatoes and dares to describe her son's fit as unpleasant, her free association takes her to sirens on the rocks off Cornwall, flirtations with the notion of love affairs, the meaning of the atomic bomb attack on Hiroshima, and with one word, we are back in the London kitchen in winter. *Meanwhile, there's the stink of baby crap, etc.*

We travel by saying---Last week in Barcelona. Or---Rome was cloudy. Or---In Tahiti I knew divorce was inevitable. Or---Varanasi is where I cremated myself. **Meanwhile** is a word that contains the schematics of time travel. Take your notebooks and research your world with attitude. Moments are distinct peninsulas votive-lit and ravaged by a bitch moon. Details are implications of socio-economic strata, aspirations and irreplaceable loss. Use your Reverse Play. Time travel with a single word. **Meanwhile**.

Each syllable is a choice. Cymbal and flute, bell, lute, coyote and bongo drum. The writer is a composer. We orchestrate. The writer is an archeologist and architect. We excavate and build. Every sentence is a juncture defined by the writer's selections in the service of articulating sensibility. Truth and free association have no inherent literary legitimacy.

You are gathering landscapes now because they are a fundamental building block. Street people and the homeless are banned. I would have banned them anyway, but I ban them now with extreme prejudice. Also garbage, trash cans, vehicles, fumes, smog, graffiti, power lines, telephone poles, communication devices and their wires and cables. No generic people, no teenage gangsters, no drooling vets missing legs, and no joggers, surfers or skateboarders. No fat people, no acne, no missing teeth or scars. Do not call Central Casting. No pets, stray cats or dogs. No cell phones or computers. And no women in BMW's with Gucci purses, please. We do not categorize through labels.

The writer is responsible for what she knows but more significantly by what she refuses to know. I will not know this culture through its transitory fashions. Do not inflict the debris of the already familiar on your reader.

In the biology of writing, landscapes are the prized undifferentiated fetal stem cells. They are filler and Set Pieces. They are the stuff of the *illusion* of free association turned into literature. Your notebook of LANDSCAPES may be the most important material you have. You are not yet novice writers. You are not yet born. We can't calibrate your innate capabilities because you haven't even attempted much of what is to be measured.

Many of you have tried to write novels. Yes? Then you know experientially that your first novel proved to be 7 or 8 pages long. You're stunned by your magnificence but recognize your story is 300 pages too short. How will you ever expand?

Landscape is an enlarging device. It's like the Inquisition's rack. It works on the level of interior monologue and it anchors your character's perceptions by providing an exterior the reader recognizes. No writer does it all, but if you can master landscape, you have a literary home.

I love landscape. Los Angeles is my primary obsession. I've set dozens of stories on and near the Santa Monica Pier. Consider the following as an example of how I've used this specific landscape as a visual and psychological touchstone.

This is the virtual tropics, with a Mexican rhythm and an Oakie beat. A not American terrain, air scored by palm fronds above ridges of bamboo and a radiant colossus of magenta bougainvillea. I navigate miles of alleys and avenues wearing the names of Spanish generals and saints by nuances of unremitting summer to the bay at Santa Monica. It's pale as if bleached by acid.

The water in winter is blue as delphiniums and larkspur. In spring, it's the cerulean you might employ for a love letter, sanctified, electric and graceful. Waters form their own morphologies and hierarchies. The fall bay is like a visa stamp or fading tattoo. Then the veiled in azure pause before sun sets. Then bells from a ship or cathedral, you can't be certain. Waves suggest rain, dream and hallucination. There is no line between drowning and communion.

The bay is listless, waves so light and restrained they're merely theoretical, like a gauzy fluid to wrap a cut in. It's a defeated blue, depressed and contained. It looks like it's on Prozac. I breathe sea dust and a confused fusion of cayenne, sandalwood, opium and wind. The ocean is continuous. In the becalmed suspension before sunsets, waves break in lines like fingers, or the multiple arms of deities from antiquity. Consider the way prayers are intoned, how the human voice insinuates itself it air and forms elegant transitory architectures. Blistering aviaries and no survivors.

On the Santa Monica Pier I know heat and its inevitabilities. Haze on the vaguely Mediterranean hills like a cursed Greece perhaps, stalled in their own fouled pastels. In this glare preceding the contaminated lavenders I prepare for sordid evening.

Sunsets in an orange so aggressively hard and metallic, it is shocking. If I looked directly at it, I would be scarred. It's a sunset that makes me think of serrated blades and car crashes and having my face reconstructed on the basis of photographs.

Let's do this quickly. Everyone, pencils at the ready. Yes, I'm allowed to use banned words. After your third book is published, the ban is removed. OK. What do we notice? We enter the *virtual*, the not real which is known musically. Then? The Reverse Play, yes. How? What is supposed to be a tropical paradise, consensually gorgeous and

exquisite, is upended and called *bleached by acid*. The waters are? *Listless, defeated and depressed. They're on Prozac. It's a cursed Greece. And? It's stalled in it's own fouled pastels. Then contaminated lavenders. The evening is? Sordid.*

So the bay is *bleached*. With bleach we birth the washed-out, faded and blanched, The reader brings associations to the page and knows bleach is used for the discolored, tainted, stained and tarnished. It also implies leaches, parasites and medical treatments that fail. And it's *bleached* by a specific agent. *Acid*. *Acid* is a millennial extravaganza of interpretations and multiple meanings that are progressively vicious and unpleasant. Bleach has properties that can blind. If you drink it, as Emma knows, it's lethal. *Acid* is also a colloquial term for the hallucinogenic, LSD. *Acid* is bitter and sour, tart and sharp. I have described the oranges of Los Angeles as too bitter to eat. With the *bleaching* by *acid* I am subliminally adding danger, brain parasites and the removal of the eyes.

Since you are writing for the 10 most intelligent people you've ever known, blindness summons Tiresias to Thebes. Eurydice. Antigone. Oracles, kings and prophets. Orphans and plague, exile and the curse of the Sphinx. For Oedipus, it gets worse.

Your reader will not consciously note the presence of Sophocles. You will be spared this embarrassment. But they will respond to your authority and feel the narrative asserting a moist pewter of tragedy. And indeed bitter swells the current here. I'm orchestrating a tsunami. Bitter as in taste, acrid and harsh. Bitter as resentful. Bitter as pungent and astringent. With astringent, my waves are now 18 feet high. I add the associations of astringent-- severe, caustic and biting, cutting, mordant and pungent.

Since everyone has by now procured an enormous infrastructure of early 20th century dictionaries and thesauruses will someone volunteer to do a complete trace on pungent? That's linguistic and historical. And round up pungent's family and known associates. Thank you. I need a run down on astringent. OK. Will you do mordant? We thank you. I need tart. And acrid. And there's more to bitter. And bleach. You will undertake one word each. We'll compile a complete list. The bleached in acid will have in excess of one hundred distinct meanings, synonyms and associations. This is a witch's brew.

The next paragraph attempts the difficult rendering of beauty. It is the directions of how to transfer the seductively exquisite to the page. We use the real world as much as possible. The real world is both too much and not enough.

The bay in winter is blue as delphiniums and larkspur. In spring, it's the cerulean you might employ for a love letter, sanctified, electric and graceful. Waters form their own morphologies and hierarchies. The fall bay is like a visa stamp or fading tattoo. Then the veiled in azure pause before sun sets. Then bells from a ship or cathedral, you can't be certain. Waves suggest rain, dream and hallucination. There is no line between drowning and communion

What's interesting here? I've used banned blue, but with a specificity that redeems it from banality. Blue as *delphiniums and larkspur*. What those flowers share in common is

not only their strikingly vivid color. They are both high altitude flowers. They suggest being airborne and unbound by gravity and conventional rules. They also suggest the high of intoxication. Delphiniums and larkspur contain a history of medicinal applications. And they're used in paints and dyes. Then what about cerulean? It's the color of *love letters*. And? It's *sanctified, electric and graceful*. The bay is the implied blue of a visa stamp or fading tattoo. So the bay is given properties from antiquity. It has a sense of romance made indelible as in the writing of a love letter.

It is blessed when described as *sanctified*, which also contains a meaning of protection. By using the word *electric*, the bay is both ancient and contemporary. The word *electric* when used with waters suggest what? Current, yes. And subliminally, suicide. There's a sense of time being suspended and unified in the choice of *graceful*. And what spectrum are we in, what does *graceful* echo? *Sanctified*. Which is repeated in the cathedral bells.

There are some tricks in this paragraph we can identify. For instance, what of giving the bay distinct and separate seasons? We call this Literary Cartography. You are the mapmaker of your creations. Almost all phenomena can be given seasons, affections, emotions, afflictions, postures, history and music. Yes, people.

As, In August, she wants peaches and jazz and beer from Germany. She stops sleeping and her feet swell. She sells her bed. The sun makes her faint. She walks boulevards barefoot, with an umbrella, searching for black men in quartets and trios with brass horns and drums.

In October, Clare feels the leaves from chestnuts and lindens falling. They undress and stand violated and inordinately exposed. Public degradation is the punishment for sin. She must be careful. She craves Gregorian chants and has her palm read on Sundays. The old woman holds her hand as if searching for stigmata and cautions her to drink tea. In autumn, Clare must have vodka. She glares at the fake fortuneteller. Clare is disappointed. She feels the rage of the abandoned and discarded. She takes her coins back. Clairvoyance must be outlawed in this city and the gypsy a fraud. Her cold turns into pneumonia.

I simply designed the character by seasons and defined her year by musical desire and medical afflictions. Much of writing is like cooking from recipes. One part music, two parts illness, stir in a cup of emotion and a cup and a half of free association. What we're doing with our sensory data now is filling our larder. We are preparing to cook.

What other tricks can we pull out of the Santa Monica Pier piece? The *visa and fading tattoo* are indications of transience. The ship, presumably coming and going, extends the metaphor. And the last sentence of the second paragraph? *There is no line between drowning and communion*? It's a big statement about the universe, yes. Remember, every paragraph is a distillation and a miniature novel. The first sentence is an introduction. The rest is detail and an exploration of the set-up. And in the final sentence, the reader is rewarded with a conclusion that appears unexpectedly and organically. It could not exist

without what has come before it. It is original and unique. We observed the bay and examined its anatomy. We explored its arteries of the *sanctified* and *electric*. We autopsied its organs of *hallucination* and *uncertainty*. We noted the disease and parade of deities. We suspended time and knew it as a fluid channel of paradox and juxtaposition. And the ending is earned and justified and credible.

I should mention metaphor. No matter how refined and diversified your selection of words is, you will rarely find the right word. That's because the right words do not exist in isolation. Words have alliances and affections with other words. They have orbits, they influence one another. In the Santa Monica Pier piece, the writing is largely metaphor. Do not fear it. Metaphor is your friend, your C-rations and AK-47 you can't live without.

Let's look at fourth paragraph. It's designed to be read out loud. In unison, please.

On the Santa Monica Pier I know heat and its inevitabilities. Haze on the vaguely Mediterranean hills like a cursed Greece perhaps, stalled in their own fouled pastels. In this glare preceding the contaminated lavenders I prepare for sordid evening.

What letters predominate in sound? In the last sentence, it is the p's and d's. In the glare *preceding* the contaminated lavenders *I prepare* for sordid evening. And in the earlier sentences? The l's. The reader is lured and hypnotized by alliteration. The ear can't miss it. But what word isn't here? What word is powerful with l's but is unnamed and banned? Hell, of course. I did not write *this is hell*, which would be telling, not showing. It would be a cliché. But my l's insinuate the brutally unequivocal reference. We aren't told we're in hell. It is clear we've stepped into a Bosch painting.

A moment on a word that is monumentally toxic. As the *bleached in acid* was a hand grenade in the first paragraph, setting a tone with at least one hundred variations of danger by poison and blindness, by mutilation, by interior hallucinations and twisted synapses in a region astringent and mordent and harsh, there's a radioactive word here. Yes, *fouled*.

First, there's a Reverse Play on the pastels. After all the cute pink pandas and leotards with stiff pink netting that ties at the waist like Mommy's apron, after the powder blue sundresses and creamy negligees, after the conventional associations of pastel with the soft, the infantile and feminine, we call pastel *foul*. What does foul mean? Like acid before it, this is a millennial harvest.

Foul is bad. OK. In what way? The dictionary says it's unclean, unpleasant, rank, polluted, horrible, tainted, fetid, stinking, rank, and soiled. There's a sense of odor in fetid and stinking and unclean. What's implied without statement? And implication is more powerful than definition. When we say Grandma fouled herself, what do we mean? She is incontinent, yes. So foul contains without Foul is bad. OK. In what way? The dictionary says it's unclean, unpleasant, rank, polluted, horrible, tainted, fetid, stinking, rank, and soiled. There's a sense of odor in fetid and stinking and unclean. What's

implied without statement? And implication is more powerful than definition. When we say Grandma fouled herself, what do we mean? She is incontinent, yes. Foul is horrible in totality and hidden within is excrement. Notice the potency of allowing the associations of a word to permeate and rise without name?

Foul has another distinct meaning. Anyone? We use the word in sports, as when a player commits a foul. He is punished for this. So to foul is defined by the dictionary as dishonest. Also fraudulent deceitful, corrupt, unfair, and insincere. There's an implication of the immoral in foul. A moral line has been breached. When juxtaposed with the pastel, what is suggested? A pedophile, perhaps? When we examine tainted and corrupt, more associations will be revealed. Please compile a list of all the possibilities.

Physical descriptions in landscape have a psychological bleed in them. They're where the exterior and interior meet and ignite. The reader is sympathetic with borders and their complexities. In contemporary writing, the reader recognizes that there's no line between drowning and communion. We stand on cliffs above oceans, in one hand a stiletto, in the other, a rose. Landscapes are internalized and serve as a vehicle for the character to express herself. Landscape can be a duet or a stage for a monologue. Landscape is what shelters, camouflages and disguises your characters. Or what imprisons and imperils them.

The pier landscape is for you to consider as you do research and write. There are recipes for writing. Notice that taken as a piece, the paragraphs form a miniature novel. It begins with acid and sustains itself with the sordid and foul. It ends with serrated blades on your face when your identity has been ripped off. This world is hell-like with criminals, frauds and pedophiles. But there are love letters, grace and sanctity as well. Los Angeles is the juncture where vulgarity and enchantment embrace in night blooming jasmine and rancid neon.

I just defined Los Angeles as an embrace of vulgarity and enchantment in jasmine and rancid neon. That's a perception presented with authority, though it has no literal substantiation and you won't find it on a map. It's not accurate and it has no modifiers.

The story is not more important on 5th Avenue in New York than 5th Street in Santa Monica, Tulsa or Memphis. Feel, smell, taste, imagine, devise the illusion of free association and invent. Start an interior dialogue with yourself and know your city by thought. Remember, little students, it is not what you see, hear, intuit and smell, but how you've attuned or as Rimbaud accurately said, deformed your senses. It is not in what you look at. It is in how you look.

Landscape #1- 12-15 pages.

- 1.) Title your fragment.
- 2.) Ignore the computer that tells you your grammar has failed the number agreement test, the subject-verb agreement, comma use, fragments, etc.

3.) Freely use photographs, postcards and images of any kind.

4.) In preparation for your journey to New Mexico, please read out loud *Blood Meriden* by Cormac McCarthy. You might try the final section of *Palm Latitudes*. Memorize *Ariel*. Neruda's landscapes are magnificent—Madrid, the Ganges, Chile and Isla Negra. Blaise Cendrars' *Prose on the Transsiberian* is the original journey without destination, the one train ride you cannot do without. When in doubt, read Molly Bloom's soliloquy out loud