

*from an upcoming book edited by Sherry Ellis titled “NOW WRITE!”
a collection of writing exercises from creative non-fiction writers*

WRITING YOUR WAY IN THE BACK DOOR: THE PAINTING AS ENTRY

by Christine Hemp

William Carlos Williams’s dictum about *things* being the life of poetry holds true in creative nonfiction as well. The essay teeming with “stuff” is much more memorable than one which floats in abstraction. A piece about love doesn’t end up in our cells unless it is grounded in the softness of your lover’s neck as it disappears into the collar of his sweatshirt. Or what about that scab you picked while you were crying on the phone to the man you knew would leave you by spring? Just like the strong poem, the strong piece of prose is rife with metaphorical power – from your mother’s out-of-tune piano to the orphan sock that keeps showing up in your tangled underwear drawer. When we turn to things, the truth comes at us through the back door, and we are surprised by ideas and emotions we didn’t know we possessed.

To take it a step further, *disparate* things – unlikely juxtapositions – help us write our way into new and unexpected “aha” moments. For example, in her essay called “Seeing,” Annie Dillard sits on the bank of Tinker Creek watching a tremor near a muskrat burrow, and then she sees a ripple in the water that suggests an underwater creature. We follow her gaze, but in the middle of her nature reverie, she introduces something else: “The ripples continued to fan upstream with a steady, powerful thrust. Night was knitting over my face an eyeless mask, and I still sat transfixed. A distant

airplane, a delta wing out of nightmare, made a gliding shadow on the creek's bottom that looked like a stingray cruising upstream. At once a black fin slit the pink cloud on the water, shearing it in two." The jet's shadow is the last thing we'd expect in a meditative piece about what it means to see, but it pushes the essay toward another level of understanding, a different perception of creature in nature. It's like a black diagonal slash through an otherwise pastoral landscape painting. These disparate things thump against one another, so that a third and unforeseen insight reveals itself in the process.

One of the assignments my nonfiction students love best involves art. I take them to the art museum and ask them to choose one painting in the collection they are attracted to, yet also makes them feel uncomfortable. (I remind them how the sculptor Rodin instructed his secretary, the poet Rilke, to go to the zoo and stare at the caged panther for a whole day.) We sit and look at our respective paintings for ten minutes so. Then we write. For fifteen minutes – non-stop. Not as an exercise in art criticism, but as a kind of “climbing in” to the painting – exploring its colors, its objects, its creator, anything that comes to mind. When we leave the museum, we have really seen – and felt – the painting in terms of color, shape, composition, medium, as well as our own associations and correspondences.

These are often the shiniest essays of the week, and I believe it is because the disparate “things” in the paintings – the color orange, a dead cow in a tree, a man in a blue coat – smack against one another. One student used these compositional elements to explore his out-of-control passions in matters of the heart. A 1924 painting by Lionel

Feininger pushed another writer – through the abstract lines of a barn planted in yellow fields— to confront her inability to separate herself from the identity of her family. Chagall’s “Blue Horse” nudged yet another to use shades of blue as metaphor in exploring the hidden expectations of motherhood in her native Philippines. What emerges, too, is a perpetuation of the muse, as if the painter’s inspirational impulse is contagious, bleeding beyond the painting into the feverish writing of the viewer.

When we concentrate on the *thing*, rather than the mere emotion or idea, we enter through the back door, stumbling into the fecund pantry rather than the tidy, acceptable ideas of the front foyer. In fact, not only is the writing stronger (muscular verbs replace modifiers and stout nouns take the place of vague pronouns), we also discover that what poet Richard Hugo calls the “triggering subject” is rarely the true subject. The things – the shadow of the plane on Tinker Creek, the angled barn, the blue horse – lead us into a larger meditation. They help us write our way into the true subject, something much more compelling than we could have predicted.

OBJECTIVE: To strike disparate things together in order to ignite a larger meaning (or, as one of my students has said, to “race toward epiphany.”) Out of this mixture comes an expanded thematic possibility, a larger flourishing of ideas than if the writer had chosen just one “subject.”

ASSIGNMENT:

Embark on a private field trip to your local art museum, or go online to the Museum of Modern Art – or the Louvre! and choose an unfamiliar painting that makes you mildly

uncomfortable. Look at it – really look at it – for ten minutes without doing anything else. Then write for fifteen minutes without stopping. Be sure to include the painter’s name, the date, the title of the painting, and the medium. “Richard Diebenkorn,” “1975,” and “oil on canvas” can prove invaluable, and they place the work in space and time. Discuss the scene, the colors, the textures, the shapes, the composition and maybe even speculate about the painter, letting your own associative synapses go wild.

Take a break. Then pull a sentence out of your free write that includes a specific element of the painting: a triangle, a shade of green, or a nude figure, and start there. Now compose an essay that tangles with the notion of relationship – with a house, a person, a tree, a city, an animal, an idea. Use the components of the painting to illuminate your own arguments with yourself and your exploration of this relationship. See if you can fasten several disparate things together in your piece to create an adhesive for a larger epiphany. Allow the work to surprise you, as if a new you had walked in your own back door.

Christine Hemp is featured periodically on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition reading her commentary and poetry. Her essay about sending a poem of hers into space on a NASA mission won her a Northwest Society of Professional Journalism Award. Hemp’s first nonfiction book manuscript The Angels Swim Fast and Glorious was a finalist in this year’s Bread Loaf Bakeless Prize and earned an Iowa Award for Literary Nonfiction. The book has also been awarded a Washington State Artist Trust Fellowship, a Barbara Deming/Money for Women grant, and the Donald Murray Award at UC Davis. She has served as poet-in-residence at three of our National Parks, and she writes about visual art and travel for national publications. She currently teaches at the University of Iowa Summer Writers Festival, Washington State Indian tribes, and the U.S. Navy. She lives in Port Townsend, Washington.
