

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Learning to Fail Better *On Revision*

REVISION CAN BE ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING and rewarding aspects of creating fiction. There is nothing some writers like more than taking a raw piece of work and reworking and polishing it to make it shine. Indeed, some people breathe a sigh of relief when the first rough draft is done and they can get to the revision process. The hardest work, that of generating a raw draft, is finished; now they can concentrate on figuring out what the story is really about, and getting it to fulfill its promise.

There's no magic bullet or panacea for revision. Every person's revision process, like his or her writing process, is different. What we do in this chapter is provide you with a flexible model for revision that has worked well for many writing students. But it's not the only way. There are many different paths by which to effectively reimagine or reinvent a piece of creative writing, and this model cannot hope to cover all of them. What this model *does* do is provide an adjunct or alternative to the conventional "workshop" method of helping students with revision that is used in so many writing courses around the country.

In this chapter we first review some wise words from established writers on what happens and what it feels like to have completed an early draft. Next we talk about the workshop method for giving and receiving criticism on early drafts of stories, and we discuss its benefits as well as its drawbacks. Then we go over the various stages of the creative process: although nothing could be more individual than each writer's process for generating creative work, some things can be said about the general stages that most creative work passes through and the kind of feedback that is most helpful at each stage.

Finally, we review a number of types of exercises that can be useful in what I call the "anti-workshop" method of revision. The main difference between this exercise section and the exercises found in the rest of the book is that these are supposed to teach you how to devise your own exercises so you can continue writing and revising on your own, even after your class or writing workshop has finished.

Advice for Writers from Writers

Perhaps there's no better way to feel relieved and reassured about this thing called creative writing than to read what some of the masters have said about the revision process. Below you'll find quotations from some of our most accomplished writers as to what it feels like to have finished an early draft.

There's not much that I like better than to take a story that I've had around the house for a while and work it over again. It's the same with the poems I write. I'm in no hurry to send something off just after I write it, and I sometimes keep it around the house for months doing this or that to it, taking this out and putting that in. It doesn't take that long to do the first draft of the story, that usually happens in one sitting, but it does take a while to do the various versions of the story. I've done as many as twenty or thirty drafts of a story. Never less than ten or twelve drafts. It's instructive, and heartening both, to look at the early drafts of great writers. I'm thinking of the photographs of galleys belonging to Tolstoy, to name one writer who loved to revise. I mean, I don't know if he loved it or not, but he did a great deal of it. He was always revising, right down to the time of page proofs. He went through and rewrote *War and Peace* eight times and was still making corrections in the galleys. Things like this should hearten every writer whose first drafts are dreadful, like mine are.

—RAYMOND CARVER

What I tend to do is not so much pick at a thing but sit down and rewrite it completely. Both for *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River* I wrote three entire drafts. After making notes on one draft I'd sit down and rewrite it again from the beginning. I've found that's much better than patching and amputating things. One has to rethink the thing completely. They say D. H. Lawrence used to write second drafts and never look at the first.

—CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

First drafts are for learning what your novel or story is about. Revision is working with that knowledge to enlarge and enhance an idea, to reform it. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, did seven or eight drafts of *The Rainbow*. The first draft is the most uncertain—where you need the guts, the ability to accept the imperfect until it is better. Revision is one of the true pleasures of writing. "The men and things of today are wont to lie fairer and truer in tomorrow's memory," Thoreau said.

—BERNARD MALAMUD

Progress does seem to come so very heavily disguised as chaos.

—JOYCE GRENFELL

All of us have failed to match our dream of perfection. I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible. If I could write all my work again, I'm convinced I could do it better. This is the healthiest condition for an artist. That's why he keeps working, trying again: he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. Of course he won't.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER

Perfection Is Our Enemy

The biggest problem many writers (beginning and otherwise) face is that they are seeking perfection. They want what they write to be smooth and polished and meaningful and affecting from the very first word, and unfortunately that is simply not to be (or not very often). This desire to excel right from the starting gate can have serious consequences. It significantly raises the odds that a writer will freeze and/or go abstract, rather than focusing on the small telling details that will eventually lead to riveting and important material. Anne Lamott discusses this with good humor and grace in “Shitty First Drafts” (pp. 455–458), and the fact is that if you can convince yourself to sit down and write something shitty every day, you’ll get a lot more done than if you are determined to write the Great American Novel or short story in flawless, unedited prose.

The Workshop Method

You may be using this book in conjunction with a workshop class. If not, perhaps you have heard about workshops and wondered how they work. The way workshops are conducted is fairly straightforward: a group of students meets, usually once a week, with an instructor or workshop coordinator. Students provide their colleagues with copies of a piece of work, giving them enough time to read it and comment on the text itself as well as provide a summary report of what they think. Then the class meets together, and everyone discusses the piece in question: what works, what doesn’t work, what needs to be further developed, and so on.

The results of a workshop can be magical, or brutal, or extraordinarily helpful, or ludicrously unhelpful, or all of the above. It depends on who is in the class, who is leading the workshop (the experience and personality and skill level of the instructor matter enormously), and the particular story being discussed.

In some workshops, the feedback is supposed to be provided along some carefully structured lines: for example, if you are “up” you submit a list of questions to the class, which will be answered within the course of the discussion. In other workshops, what happens is a sort of freeform debate that can range all over the map. In any case, the goal is the same: to provide you (the writer) with sufficient information about your piece so that you can return to it and begin revising it to make it better.

Proponents of the workshop method say that it’s the best way to obtain a thorough and productive reading of your work. During the most traditional workshops, if you’re “up” you are supposed to remain silent throughout the discussion; no matter how misguided or mistaken you think the group is about your piece, you must keep your opinion to yourself until the discussion has been concluded. The idea behind this (and it’s a valid one, in many ways) is that, since under most circumstances you wouldn’t be there to “defend” or otherwise interpret your work for readers (if the piece were published in a magazine or as part of a book, for example), the

more closely the class can replicate a fresh and unbiased reading of the work, the better for you.

And when it works, it works well. You may get valuable information about your work from classmates who respect you and honor your intentions, and you can take the feedback home with you to work productively on the next draft.

However, there are many drawbacks to the workshop method. Problems can occur when there are personality clashes within the workshop, or when certain students are arrogant or disrespectful of one another's work. Some instructors, too, don't do a good job of monitoring and controlling discussion, which can get stalled in unproductive ways. Finally, there's the inclination of the group to want to enforce its aesthetics on the individual. And, as Madison Smartt Bell says, the workshop method has no way of rewarding success:

It sounds almost idyllic: a happy community of cooperating artists. But there are snakes in the garden.

I was aware of the first pitfall before I ever came to Iowa. Fiction workshops are inherently almost incapable of recognizing *success*. The fiction workshop is designed to be a fault-finding mechanism; its purpose is to diagnose and prescribe. The inert force of this proposition works on all the members, and the teacher too. Whenever I pick up a student manuscript and read a few pages without defect, I start to get very nervous. Because my *job* is to find those flaws. If I *don't* find flaws, I will have *failed*. It takes a wrenching sort of effort to perform the inner *volte-face* that lets me change from a hostile to an enthusiastic critic and start rooting for the story to succeed. [. . .]

At Iowa, I began to recognize some other hazards of the workshop method of which I'd been previously unaware. At Iowa, the students were very diligent about annotating each manuscript and writing an overarching commentary at the end—each student producing a separate version of the instructor's work (and some of them were already teaching undergraduate workshops). When the classroom discussion was finished, these fourteen annotated copies would be handed over to the unfortunate author, along with mine. My heart misgave me every time I watched the student (victim) gather them up, and an inner voice whispered, *Please, when you get home, just burn those things*.

But of course they didn't do that. It would be idiotic if they had. After all, this was the criticism they'd come to receive—they'd paid for it, worked for it, striven for it. I found out through private conversations that many of these students, if not all, would indeed spread out the fifteen different annotated copies and try somehow to incorporate *all* the commentary into a revision of the work.

The results of this kind of revision were often very disheartening. I'd get second drafts that very likely had less obvious flaws than the first, but also a whole lot less interest. These revisions tended to live up to commonly heard, contemptuous descriptions of workshop work being well-tooled, inoffensive, unexceptional, and rather dull. —MADISON SMARTT BELL, *Narrative Design*

Jane Smiley, who also teaches MFA workshops, found that a traditional workshop didn't work for her students, who got combative and overly critical of each

other's work while eagerly looking for approval from the teacher, rather than learning from the discussion and deciding what *they* thought. Here she talks about her method for conducting workshops these days, which she calls her "fiction writing boot camp":

Well, the first draft they turn in they're usually pretty proud of, and they think of it as fairly polished. And with the first story always, no matter how hard I've prepared them and no matter how hard they've tried not to, what they're really seeking is praise. They want for the impossible thing to happen, for me and the class to say, "This is great, you don't have to do any more drafts, just send it off now and it'll get published, I guarantee it." In my experience the first drafts are fairly short, fairly polished, and with some problem in them that seems fairly minimal. Let's say the section that's supposed to be the climax will be confusing. So we'll talk about that and we'll say that the person has to clear up the confusing parts of the climax for next week. But usually that involves all sorts of other things, too, like a more careful defining of the characters, or making the rising action move more slowly and clearly. It ends up requiring a kind of narrative restructuring just to make the climax less confusing.

As soon as they open up this box of the first draft, which is in, what shall we say, a state of *faux* completion, then the whole thing starts to fall apart. And the second draft is often a mess, because they are trying to bring in or explore elements that aren't in balance anymore. They're usually disappointed with the second draft; there's more to it but it's more of a mess, too. The third draft is better but still in a state of "uncontrol." But often by the time we've talked about the third draft we're all saying, "Aha!" and what we're saying "Aha" about is that we as readers feel that we finally understand what the author is getting at, and the author finally understands where *he's* going, too. Usually then they feel a certain amount of self-confidence about going on to the fourth draft, and it's really much better and more complete but often still unfinished. So they say they want to do a fifth draft, and I say, "No you have to go to the next story."

—JANE SMILEY, "A Conversation with Jane Smiley"

Other teachers have found individual ways to deal with the pitfalls and problems of the workshop method. My personal misgivings about the process are that I feel that the interests of the individual and the group are diametrically opposed. Workshops are great for the students who are critiquing the manuscript in question: they get to sharpen their critical claws and dissect a piece in a way that can be very helpful for their own analytical abilities—they can then take the skills they learn from criticizing their colleagues' work and apply it to their own.

But it's not necessarily a good thing if you're the writer whose work is under discussion. First, it can be very discouraging to have each and every flaw pointed out—and not even pointed out, but eagerly discussed and denounced. A teacher meeting with a student on an individual basis wouldn't necessarily redline everything, but would instead focus on a few things—things that student would be able to "hear" without becoming discouraged. All too often, in a workshop the teacher's role

becomes one of defending a student against an over-eager throng of well-meaning but ultimately ruthless lynchers.

Second, the kind of advice parceled out during workshops isn't always appropriate for the stage that a work is in. You may be trying something new that doesn't work—yet. But a workshop may well decide that a section that isn't working simply needs to be removed. "Take it out!" is a common phrase heard in workshops. Yet the passage in question, when refined, could become a critical part of the story. Just because it isn't working now doesn't mean it won't work in the next draft, or the next, or the next.

Third, students in a workshop, unsure of what to say about a piece, frequently ask for "more." They want more of the mother, of the dog, of the reason that the boy threw away the toy that was so important to him. Sometimes they have a legitimate point: there is a gap in the story, and some additional development is needed before the piece is complete. But, in my experience, this request for more information can often result in overkill: by asking for more, critics force the writer into tipping the balance between a delicately wrought piece of work and one that has everything spelled out too neatly or obviously.

The net result: after a workshop, you can go home with too many voices in your head, which can pollute the revision process. As Madison Smartt Bell says in *Narrative Design*, all too often the next draft of the piece is tepid, watered down, and has lost its force. People—often with the best intentions—want to remake a story in their own image, and it can be difficult to shake the impression that their comments leave.

Undue Influence: A Cautionary Tale

Two of the readings at the end of this chapter provide a cautionary tale about the dangers of relying too much on other people while revising your work. These readings have to do with the work of Raymond Carver, especially the work that he generated when working with his longtime friend and editor, Gordon Lish. Indeed, it has been suggested that Carver's celebrated minimalism might well have been more Lish's doing than a reflection of Carver's own aesthetic predilections: the two stories show two different treatments of the same material. As you'll see, when given a chance, Carver rewrote one of his stories to reflect a more open, less minimal version of the prose: compare "The Bath" (pp. 458–463) and "A Small, Good Thing" (pp. 463–480) to see how the two versions play out.

This should be a cautionary tale to all of us. Although we might have strong opinions about someone else's work, we must always be respectful of their vision and intentions, and never assume that we have the answer to someone else's creative challenges. I tell my students that they need to approach a workshop critique carrying two equally strong but contradictory thoughts in their heads: to be open to criticism and ready to receive whatever they can learn from the discussion, and to retain the option of telling people to go to hell if the advice doesn't make sense. Unless you

can somehow navigate between these two ways of thinking about criticism, a workshop will be of little or no use to you—and might even cause some harm.

The Developmental Stages of a Creative Work

It's important to understand that the creative process is not linear. You don't move seamlessly from initial concept, to first draft, to revision, to copyediting, to publishing. There are all sorts of reversals, returns, retreats. Sometimes a piece is magically done after just one or two revisions, but more often it takes a lot more than that. Sometimes it's necessary to tear up the latest draft and return to the original source of the material. Sometimes it's necessary to rethink a whole piece even after the twentieth revision.

Still, there *are* some things you can say about the stages of a creative work. Just as Richard Hugo talks about writing one's way from the "triggering" to the "real" subject (p. 35), we can talk in a general way about the various stages that a creative work goes through to get from the initial idea to the final draft.

Stage 1: Initial generating: The piece is being messily generated, as per the "triggering" subject we discussed in Chapter 2. This stage eventually leads to the first (rough) draft. What's the best help that you can provide a colleague with at this stage? Merely an "attaboy" or "attagirl." "Yes, you're writing, and there's something of interest there. Keep going!"

Stage 2: Creative revisioning (drafts 1 through 20+): Although a first draft has been generated, the piece is still usually under "deep" creative construction that often requires complete rewriting of the point of view, the setting, the scenes, the characters, the plot, and so on. During this stage the writer is gradually working your way from the "triggering" into the "real" subject. What's the best help that you can provide a colleague with at this stage? Exercise-based revision suggestions (see below).

Stage 3: Constructive revisioning (drafts 2 through 20+): The piece has solidified and can now be examined, and critiqued, as a whole piece, rather than as something that is still under primary construction. This is where a traditional workshop is the most helpful, by providing feedback on character development, plot, scene versus narrative—all the things that can be discussed safely once a piece has started to "jell." Prior to this stage, however, a workshop can frequently do more harm than good.

Stage 4: Copyediting: The piece is done, and now it needs to be examined for wordsmithing, grammar, awkward syntax—anything that detracts from a smooth, polished read.

One of the worst things you can do to a piece is to assume it's more complete than it is. And one of the most critical problems with the workshop method is that a

workshop is generally best for critiquing manuscripts that have entered the constructive revisioning stage—which, in other words, are pretty far along. Are the characters believable? Is the plot working? Is the narrative rich and evocative? Do we have the right scenes, dramatized correctly? All these things can be examined once a piece has solidified.

Yet a good many stories are shown to workshops prior to this stage. They are critiqued as though they are more finished than they actually are. And nothing can be more damaging to a piece than to have it “frozen” in place before it is ready. What’s critical is that a piece stays “fluid” for as long as necessary to ensure that all the relevant material has been fully explored.

“Hot Spots” and Other Noteworthy Aspects of an Early Draft

What can we do if a piece is not yet at the constructive revisioning stage? One of the most helpful things we can do when reading an earlier draft by a colleague or student—one that is still in the creative revisioning stage, for example—is to point out what’s interesting, or what seem like “hot spots” in the text. You’re not assuming that all the scenes are in place, or that the characters or relationships have jelled, or that the plot has solidified. Rather, you are merely indicating to the writer the places in the text where you felt a quickening of interest, or, conversely, those places that seem to have the most potential, even though they have yet to be fully developed.

The point is not to help a fellow writer “Band Aid” together a piece by glossing over defects or superficially mending holes, but to encourage deep, creative revision by helping the writer question where the heart of a piece really is.

An Exercise-Based Approach to Deep Revision

In addition to pointing out “hot spots,” the single most helpful way I’ve found to help students is what I call the anti workshop, or an exercise based approach to deep revision. Rather than directly telling a student writer what to do to a piece, I suggest exercises to be done “in the margins.” The exercises may result in text that never becomes part of the story directly, but it will inform the writer’s understanding of the work nonetheless.

For example, say that the relationship between two characters—a mother and a daughter—is undeveloped. A workshop would point this out—and probably make recommendations on how it could be fixed. But an exercise based approach to deep revision doesn’t presume to tell you, the writer, what to do (or not to do). Instead, your colleagues would suggest exercises that would “explode” open the piece in order to give you a greater understanding of the relationship between the two characters and help you understand what to do next—even if the actual results of the exercise never make it into the story.

The point isn’t to put a Band Aid on the story at a weak spot, but instead to put a metaphorical stick of dynamite there, to explode the piece in a way that teaches you

more, and more interesting, things about the piece than you were previously aware of. The goal: to trick you into pushing your material in fresh and surprising directions—by thinking small. (Thinking “big” when attempting revision can cause you to panic and get blocked; it also often results in contrived and labored prose.) Not incidentally, this approach eliminates the danger that the critic tries to rewrite the story in his or her own image. An exercise-based approach to deep revision enables the writer to go back into the piece and explore and learn for himself or herself.

For example, one exercise suggestion could be for you to write five vignettes of the last five times the mother and daughter disagreed. Or, conversely, the last five times the mother and daughter *agreed* about something. By writing out these things, you will learn more about the relationship and more about the situation of the story. You might even learn how to fix the problem of the undeveloped relationship, or at least see your way to the next step. This is what an exercise-based approach to revision is all about: helping you see what can be done next without dictating such “fixes” to you.

There are all sorts of exercises that one can do when working “in the margins.” The important thing is to remember that much of what you generate with these types of device may not end up in the piece itself. But you’ll almost certainly learn something about your material, and you might even—if you’re lucky—get onto something exciting. And you shouldn’t be alarmed if your piece ends up messier and less coherent than when you began. That’s usually a good thing: the point of exercise-based revision isn’t to copyedit, but to *explore*.

A Word about Constraints

Contrary to what you might think, absolute freedom isn’t always beneficial to creativity. Instead, what psychologists and scientists are finding is that *constraints*, or limits in choices, are often more conducive to creativity than the blank page or empty computer screen.

“The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees oneself of the chains that shackle the spirit,” wrote Igor Stravinsky, the composer, talking about this phenomenon. Which, of course, is what we do when we do exercises: we’re imposing certain constraints on our ability to write. Instead of being told, “Write about anything,” we’re being told to write within a very particular context, one with constraints all around it.

OULIPO is an entire movement based on this concept of constraints. Standing for the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature, OULIPO is a group of writers and mathematicians whose members include Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, Claude Berge, Georges Perec, and Italo Calvino. The idea behind OULIPO is to generate new works of literature based on puzzles and formulas—and constraints. For example, one of the most famous works to come out of the OULIPO movement is a novel by Georges Perec that was written

completely without the letter “e.” Other OULIPO constraints include writing a piece based on only the letters that make up your name, or by randomly choosing words out of a book. Any method that limits a writer’s choices involves constraints, and constraints can be very conducive to creativity.

Constraints are important when it comes to exercise-based revision also, because we’re not advocating total freedom. We’re not saying, “Do anything at this point to open up the text.” We’re usually giving some very specific instructions with the idea they will induce, not inhibit, the creative spark.

EXERCISES

As a way to categorize the various types of exercises you can use during the revision process, I have come up with four broad categories of constraint: analytical/mechanical, creative, research-based, and chance-based. Examples of each type are listed below. The goal of this section is to inspire you to build your own exercises, rather than depending on exercises from others. The more adept you are at creating constraint-based writing activities, the closer you are to being able to tackle the revision process on your own.

Analytical / Mechanical Exercises

These kinds of exercise are precisely that: they analyze. These are good to do when your creative juices are running a little low and you want to do something, even if it starts out being mechanical. Because that’s what happens with these analytical exercises: they start out slow and methodical, but very often they lead to creative inspiration, which is of course the point. Remember, this is not an exclusive list: there are many mechanical things you can do to a manuscript to jump-start a productive revision session.

- Retype the story (or a section of the story). The simple act of going over the piece word by word will spark new ideas.
- Highlight all forms of “to have” and “to be.” By replacing them with more active verbs, you can often see where this piece lacks movement or energy.
- Highlight all “-ing” verbs. Then check each sentence for awkward syntax or unnecessary verbiage. Again, this is usually a sign of a deeper problem, such as imprecise rendering of a key image or action.
- Highlight all abstractions or generalities. Question whether the section has been adequately grounded in concrete sensory detail.
- Examine all imagery (any object, person, or place described using one or more of the senses). Is it *precise* enough? Does it push the reader toward an inevitable (and complex) emotional response? If not, focus and intensify.
- Highlight all metaphors and similes. Make sure they *add something* to the story. Also make sure you’re not over-relying on them. Telling us what something is *like*

before telling us what it *is* is often a sign you're having difficulty rendering something complex (an emotion or interaction) precisely on the page.

- Read out loud and listen to the rhythm of the language. If you stumble, highlight the sentence.
- Put the damn thing away for six months.

Creative Exercises

Most of the exercises in this book are creative. These are the ones that attempt to get the creative process going, to promote ideas and inspiration. There's literally no end to the creative exercises you can come up with: all of them involve constraints of some kind, and constraints are good for creativity. Some of my favorite creative exercises are list-making ones, such as *Things I Was Taught / Things I Was Not Taught* (p. 38) and *Sins of Commission, Sins of Omission* (p. 339). Or generating a handful of "moments" that fulfill a particular requirement, such as "the last five times this character felt rage" or "the last five times she made a mistake." Here are just a few of the creative constraints you can use to open up a piece for revision:

- Change the point of view of the piece and rewrite. See what you learn.
- Change the tense (from past to present, or vice versa).
- Introduce a new character who summarizes what happens in his or her own words.
- Write about an event in your character's past without which the current situation couldn't exist.
- Write about the current situation from the point of view of a character looking back from ten years in the future.
- Make a list of the things that *won't* happen to the characters as a result of this scene (situation) being enacted.
- Describe physical aspects of the scene in great detail: the setting, the characters, the clothes, the food. Do this obsessively. Do not worry about whether it is *interesting*.
- Describe a number of unrelated events occurring nearby as this scene unfolds.
- Describe a number of unrelated events occurring *far away* as this scene unfolds.
- Describe a prediction made in the past that this scene fulfills.
- Change the setting to an unlikely place: for example, from Paris to Milwaukee. Adjust all details accordingly.
- Describe the scene as each character would describe it in his or her diary, without editing.
- Rewrite the scene as a "family legend" narrated by the child of one of the characters.
- If narrative, rewrite as scene.

- If scene, rewrite as narrative.
- Do any sort of “listing” exercise you can think up to learn about a character, place, or dramatic event.

Research-Based Exercises

Another category of exercises requires the writer to go out into the world and gather additional information. Established writers often use research to help spark creative ideas. Again, this is just a representative sample—this list could go on and on. Any thing that you can research at the library or on the Internet is fair game.

- Find out ten facts about the place in which your story is set that you didn’t know before.
- Interview a person whose profession is being used in the story, and find out ten things about what the person does that you didn’t know before.
- Research five recipes that the people in the story were eating (or could have been eating).
- Find out ten things that were happening in the world at the same time as the story (they don’t necessarily have to be in the story; in fact, it’s better if they’re not).
- Interview five people about what they would do if one of the events of the piece befell them.
- Research the kind of music that would have been playing on the radio at the time the piece is set.
- Learn ten facts about the religion of one of the characters in your piece.
- Research the type of salary and subsequent budget that your main character has.
- Find out what was in the newspaper the day the events in the piece transpired.

Chance-Based Exercises

Chance-based exercises are based on events that can’t be predicted but are randomly generated or happened upon. Chance-based exercises are exciting and interesting because they open you up to possibilities that would never have occurred to you logically.

- Go to your bookshelf and pick out the third book from the right. Open to the third chapter; write down the first, third, seventh, and ninth words in the chapter; and write several paragraphs for your piece based on that combination of words.
- Take a walk around the block. Make whatever happens (or doesn’t happen), or whatever you observe, the basis for a freewrite that you can include in your piece.
- Make a list of all the things that happened to you this week that surprised you. Do a freewrite on one of them that might be relevant to your piece.

- Go out to a café or other place where you can hear people talking. Write down a conversation you hear and then do a freewrite based on it.
- Turn on the radio to a music channel and wait until the fifth song comes on. Do a freewrite based on your associations with the song.
- Roll a die. Whatever number you get, take that many steps outside your door and do a freewrite based on what you immediately see.
- Do a freewrite based on the third phone call you get in a given day (if it's a telemarketer, so be it).
- Turn to page 6 (or page 10, or whatever) of your local newspaper and do a freewrite based on one of the articles you find there.
- Flip a coin. If you get heads, go someplace you wouldn't ordinarily go and do a freewrite based on what happens to you there. If you get tails, go to a familiar place and ditto.

Revision Example

The following texts constitute three versions of the same story, by Jan Ellison, so you can see the extent of a true revision. First is the germ of the story, which is very short, very succinct, less than 1,000 words; following that is the first draft of the "real" story; and then, finally, the finished story as it was published in the *New England Review*. You can see how some scenes are the same and some descriptions are the same, but by the final draft it's a completely different story, expanded, fully developed. The names of the characters have been changed, and we now have the sense of a narrator with a current life of her own (husband, kids) looking back on her life.

"Germ" of Story (written in response to an exercise)

When I think of Jamie today, I see him in a staggering, energetic drunk, delivering to me the gift of a tall potted plant. He said nothing, only stumbled into my apartment, placed the plant in the center of the room and left without closing the door. He was back in ten minutes with another. Then another, and another, all the time saying nothing, only smiling a wild, hilarious smile. He was stealing the plants from the lobby of the hotel across the street. I laughed and accepted his gifts. Finally he tripped and fell and passed out in the middle of the living room, amidst a modest forest of green. I curled up next to his heavy brown body, my hands in his white-blond hair, and we slept. In the morning he was gone. That was his way. But I knew where to find him. Him and Freddie. Because always, there was Freddie, too.

Jamie and Freddie shared a room the size of a walk-in closet, in a stale, dank apartment in King's Cross, on a street where all the squalor of Sydney collected, where the wasted young whores swayed, in doorways, to and fro, to and fro, where the bars were, where we drank every night. Jamie and Freddie drank martinis and at first I pretended to but I couldn't get to like them so I drank draught beer in pints. We always sat at the bar. They played Bob Dylan on the

jukebox and time seemed different, not at all important. Afterward, I slept with Jamie on his mattress on the floor. We rustled and rubbed and sneaked silent orgasms with half our clothes on, and always there was the sound of Freddie's breathing across the room, on the mattress against the other wall, in the room **no bigger than a walk-in closet.**

When I think of myself at that time I see a picture they took of me—~~passed~~ out drunk in my black gauze dress, on Jamie's mattress on the floor. My black hair is splayed out behind me on a stained pillow with no case, and they have placed a six-pack of beer next to my head and a pack of cigarettes on my belly. I don't know now what they meant by that; whether it meant they mocked me or loved me. At the time I didn't care; I was one of them; I was a part of it; I belonged.

We were drunk every night and the thing I regret now is not that it went on so long but that it didn't go long or wild enough. I shook off my hangover each morning and left them to go home to my apartment, to shower and change and go off to my typing job, while they slept the morning away, their sweet bodies heavy and still, and woke at noon for a beer. That is what I missed, and what can't be gotten back now, not now with two small children and one on the way and a house—a house about which people say, oh, it's so beautiful, did you pick out all the colors yourself?

My friends, the ones I'd traveled to Australia with, said: "You can't keep doing this. You're getting ugly. You're not yourself. You're drunk every night and you didn't show up for our dinner party." It was something they'd agreed upon, to face me across the coffee table in their pristine living room in their pristine apartment in the complex with a security punchpad at the gate. Their warning worked on me like white noise; mostly I ignored it, but once in awhile it broke through and worked its way into the hilarity of that time, making me pause and wonder. The fun we had felt like happiness, it did, and I was not prepared to give it up. So I kept going out to the bars to find Jamie and Freddie, and when the bars closed I sprinted or stumbled or was carried back to their apartment where I slept on the damp mattress with Jamie, curled into his large sweet body. Always there was Freddie, on the mattress at the other end of the room, breathing.

Only one night it happened that I was there with Freddie, on the other mattress, just sitting, and then we were kissing, this one deep long-remembered kiss, our tongues and our fingers filled up with booze, the memory of that kiss, too, filled up with booze, petrified under half a dozen martinis and ten pints of beer. So it goes on, that kiss, the one that either he or I ended because there was Jamie, on his mattress against the other wall, in the room that was no bigger **than a walk-in closet, in a dank apartment in King's Cross, where all the** squalor of Sydney gathered for the long, long party, there was Jamie, saying "Hey," at first, laughing, then "Hey," louder, more confused, then "Hey!" a third time, until we stopped. Stopping it was an act of will, an act against nature. I can feel it still, the drag of his lips on mine, the intention of that kiss to go on to its reckless conclusion. Freddie whispered something afterwards,

some incoherent words that I remembered then and that I wish I could remember now.

In the morning the kiss was not remembered. At least we never spoke of it. Still, I imagine it to be the moment I lost them, the moment that the trip north, the drunk trip in the rusted green van they bought for a thousand dollars, up through Queensland and the Gold Coast to the hot wastelands around Darwin, before the van gave out, it seemed the moment it was decided that the trip would belong in their memories but not in mine, except as an emptiness.

First Draft: working title "Jimmy and Ray"

I met Jimmy on a bus tour on the east coast of New Zealand in a great rain storm. He and his best friend Ray were on a bus tour south, I was on the same tour but headed north, and we ended up in the same tiny bar in the same tiny town in this tremendous storm. I had ridden alone that morning on a rented bicycle three miles along a dirt path to the glacier and on the way back it began to rain. I headed straight into the bar without stopping to fix up my hair and there they were drinking martinis at eleven o'clock in the morning. Jimmy was tall and fair-haired with clear innocent eyes and a lovely face. Ray was smaller and darker and not at all handsome. He had a look of distrust about him, but he shared with Jimmy a Southern drawl that seemed inviting and I went right up behind them and ordered a drink. Jimmy moved over to make a place between them and that was the beginning. We drank for two hours and watched the rain and once in a while my knee would knock up against Jimmy's beneath the bar. Then my bus was going north and theirs was going south and I almost changed directions and went with them but I thought the better of it. What with Jimmy being the one I wanted to knock knees with and Ray being the one I wanted to talk to I thought I better get back on my bus and go north.

It was October when I bumped into them again. I walked into a bar in Sydney, where I'd been living for a few months, and there they were drinking martinis.

"You again," Ray said.

"Have a drink!" Jimmy bellowed out. They were already drunk and in good spirits.

We drank until the bars closed, then Jimmy walked me home and stayed the night on the couch. He was like that, a true Southern gentleman, even after eight straight hours of drinking. My roommates didn't like a guy passed out on the couch so after that we passed out at the flat in King's Cross that he shared with Ray and a half dozen other guys and their backpacks. There was always someone sleeping on the couch there and nobody cared.

It was easy to love Jimmy because he expected nothing and because we were always with Ray and we were always drunk or on our way there. There was no requirement to make conversation or to get to know each other in some essential way, only the necessity of showing up at the bar, where he would be drinking with Ray, and Bob Dylan would be on the jukebox and I could slide in

between them and order a beer on their tab. They put everything on one of their father's credit cards and the bills were paid back home.

We got drunk in the bars all over King's Cross and Woolloomooloo and Circular Quay and when it got really hot in December, we celebrated with a case of beer and a ferry ride over to Manly for a long day at the beach. At dusk we played frisbee and watched the sea go from green to indigo to black and then when it was very dark and we were very drunk we went for a last hilarious swim in huge waves that ought to have scared me but that did not. That whole time was like that; I ought to have been afraid, or worried about my health or my safety or my reputation, but I was not. I was safe and drunk and happy and what I regret was not the time we wasted but that it all ended too soon.

We caught the last ferry home and stumbled back to their flat, arms linked with me in the middle, and I slept with Jimmy on his mattress on the floor. We rustled and rubbed and sneaked silent orgasms with half our clothes on, and there was the sound of Ray's breathing a few feet away, on the mattress against the other wall, in the room no bigger than a walk-in closet. Laid end-to-end the two mattresses covered the whole floor. There was a poster of Faye Dunaway and Mickey Rourke in *Barfly* on one wall; there were clothes strewn about and a half a bottle of whiskey and that was all.

Jimmy was a drinker without angst, without remorse, without resolutions. I loved his sweet brown skin and his large lumbering frame and I loved not loving him, not needing to imagine a future with him. I knew almost nothing about him, only that he grew up in the South, in Raleigh, that his parents had a summer house on the beach, that he went to college close to home and joined a fraternity and did lots of drugs. I knew that he was a drinker like me, a drinker who would always say what the hell and have another. Later, it would work that way for me with babies, so that one after another they came, every two years, until my house filled up with little bodies, and still it would seem a good idea to have another, if only to experience one last time that perfectly clean smell, that absolute sense of ownership, that soft head under my chin in the dead of night.

Jimmy was a staggering, energetic drunk. One night, just after we'd met again in Sydney, he stumbled into my apartment and delivered to me the gift of a tall potted plant. He said nothing, only placed the plant in the center of the room and left without closing the door. He was back in ten minutes with another. Then another and another. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He said nothing, only smiled a wild, hilarious smile. He was stealing the plants from the lobby of the hotel across the street. I laughed and accepted his gifts. Finally he tripped and fell and passed out in the middle of the living room amidst the greenery. I curled into his big brown body and we slept. In the morning he was gone, but I knew where to find him.

Jimmy knew something about being kind to women. He held doors open for me; he made me drink a glass of milk before bed to stave off the hangover; he tucked the sheet around me if I passed out first.

Sometimes he was the one to pass out first.

I wanna get drunk, he'd yell, knocking his head against the wall when Ray and I had dragged him home from the bars.

Lay down, I'd say, you're already drunk.

Am I? he'd say with a grin full of straight white teeth.

Then he'd fall down on the bed and close his blue, bloodshot eyes and go to sleep.

I never asked what he studied in college, or what he planned to do when the trip was over, or whether he had ever been in love.

It was Ray I wanted to understand; it was Ray who'd been damaged. Ray was dark and swarthy and all his features seemed bunched up into the middle of his face. He lived right on the edge of ugly but to talk to him was to know something about danger and privilege and heartbreak; to talk to him was to want to heal him or win him. When he was drunk he talked to me about Annalee, Annalee the beauty, with red hair down to her butt riding around in her yellow convertible in the fall. She always drove, he said, Always. Annalee had a cocaine habit; she stole money from him and then left him for her mother's boyfriend. But when he spoke about her it was with reverence; he had not forgiven her but he had not yet given her up. Something about that made me want to make him see other women in the world; it made me want to make him see me.

In March, when the rains began again, Jimmy and Ray made plans for a trip north. They bought a rusted green van with a bed in the back, and though I'd been there with them all through that raucous, timeless summer, in the flat and in the bars and on the beach and on the dirty mattress at the end of that room that was no more than a walk-in closet, with Jimmy and his sweet brown belly and his clear blue eyes and his gentle talk, with Ray at the other end of the room snoring like only a drunk can snore; even though I'd been right in the center of all that, somehow it became clear that I would not be going on the trip north. The bed in the back of the van could only sleep two.

"There's the front seat," I finally said.

Jimmy said, "Ah, c'mon Cath." His voice was soft with apology.

Ray said, "No fuckin' way. It's a guy thing."

I stuck my tongue out at him and he smiled.

The day they left was gray and rainy, like all the days that followed. We stood on the sidewalk while they piled their backpacks and their tent and an arsenal of booze in the van. Jimmy came and stood behind me. His hands were warm on the back of my neck. I was trying to think of something flip to say.

"Well, see ya," I said, and it came out angry. I gave him a hug, but not a kiss and I didn't give Ray a good-bye at all. I walked off before they got in the van so I wouldn't be the girl standing on the wet sidewalk waving good-bye.

I told myself: It was because I was broke and they were tired of buying my drinks. It was because they imagined the women they would meet on the open road, Australian women with darling accents, blond hair, skin still brown from summer. It was because I had played the game badly, had pretended for too

long that I didn't want to go on the trip, that I didn't have the money, that I had to work. Right up to that last morning, I expected them to change their minds, to say Ah, c'mon Cath, get your stuff, as if my invitation had simply been overlooked.

But there was also this: There was one deep long-remembered kiss on the wrong side of the room on the wrong dirty threadbare mattress, with Ray.

This is what I remember about the night it happened: Jimmy wears a T-shirt over his big shoulders. The T-shirt is barely hanging on his body and I remember something about that, that we ripped it during the party at the flat that night, not in a rage or a passion but just because there had been a tiny hole, just above his right nipple, and I began to tear and it tore and tore and everyone joined in and then someone poured a beer over our heads. We didn't take offense, nobody did, not ever during all those months. At some point in the night my roommates came by; three lovely girls with bare muscular calves, short skirts, high heels. When they arrived, for some reason I had a paper bag over my head. They stayed only a few minutes, time for one gin and tonic each, then they headed off to a club to go dancing, leaving the boys cheated and me relieved.

Somehow at the end of the night I was sitting cross-legged on Ray's mattress, facing him and that poster of Mickey Rourke. I was watching Mickey for a sign. Then the tips of my fingers were touching the tips of Ray's on both hands, then we were leaning into each other, then we were kissing, this one long boozy necessary kiss. Jimmy said "Hey," at first with laughter in his voice, then "Hey," louder, then "Hey!" a third time, and this time he was standing over us yelling so we stopped. Stopping it was like the pain of coming up out of a deep, dreamless sleep when your baby cries in the night. Ray whispered something to me as we pulled away from each other, some words that I understood and cherished and then forgot and that I can never get back.

In the morning, neither of them remembered. At least it was never mentioned. Still, I imagine it to be the moment I lost them, the moment that the trip north—the drunk trip in the green van they bought for a thousand dollars, up through Queensland and the Gold Coast, all the way up to the hot wastelands around Darwin and then on down along the west coast—it seemed to be the moment that the trip around the whole of Australia in a rusted green van became a thing that would take place without me.

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JAN ELLISON

The Company of Men

FOR A FEW YEARS I HAD IN MY POSSESSION two rain slickers that smelled of whiskey and cigarettes and aftershave. They were cherry-red and lined with fleece, and I kept them in a cardboard box on a shelf above the toilet in the tiny apartment

where I lived alone. Then when I was about to be married and I wanted to be rid of so many failings, so many unhelpful habits and longings, when I believed the past could no longer inform me, I threw the slickers into the Goodwill pile and lost them forever. Now what is left is a single photo I return to now and then, of two young men in bright red coats hitchhiking under a darkened sky.

I met them first on my last full day in New Zealand, after I'd rented a bike and ridden three miles up a dirt path to touch my fingers to a glacier. It began to rain, and by mid-morning when I got back down to the village, I was soaked through to my bra. My bus for Christchurch wasn't leaving until one, and across from the bus depot was a pub. Inside there was a fire in the fireplace and two young men—Jimmy and Ray—standing at the bar in their rain slickers drinking martinis. Ray was stocky and dark, with a sunken torso, small eyes, and a huge, humped nose. His hair was thin and black above a high, smooth forehead, and all his features seemed bunched up in the middle of his face. Jimmy was taller and fair, with square shoulders and fine blue eyes.

His hair curled at his ears and at the nape of his sunburned neck. There was something loopy, almost accidental about the way Jimmy stood in his frame, as if he were blind to the effect his size and good looks might have—the effect they were having—on a wet girl standing in the doorway of a bar seven thousand miles from home.

I'd been traveling alone for a year, since I finished college, through Europe and India and Southeast Asia, and I'd just spent a month at the northernmost tip of the North Island picking tomatoes in the sun for minimum wage, eating cheese sandwiches, and sleeping alone in a pitch-black room of empty bunks. It came to me suddenly as I stood in the doorway of the bar that I was sick of the struggle in it—sick of crouching in the sun, sick of taking it all in, of making notes on yellow legal pads, of stumping across rock and snow in my boots and across sand and kelp and coral and wet grass in my worn-down Tevas. It was not exactly loneliness I wanted to banish as I crossed the bar toward them but a kind of self-imposed austerity, a compulsion to justify the experience, to tear meaning from it, to bring something home. It was the days of weighty, maturing experiences strung together one after another in what seemed to me then a long stretch without a flirtation, a debate, a convergence—a black-out drunk.

Jimmy and Ray had just graduated from the University of North Carolina and they were on a tour of New Zealand and Australia and maybe Bali or Kathmandu. Under their rain slickers, they dressed the way they must have dressed back home, in jeans and leather loafers and button-down shirts, and they drawled when they talked. They addressed me as *y'all*, which made me feel oddly important, as if I carried with me the authority of a secret entourage. We drank five fast rounds together while the rain beat the window and the mud slid off the hill outside into a great brown puddle. In the distance were the white tips of the glacier rising up out of a black mass of cloud.

While we drank, Jimmy rested his hand against the small of my back and Ray told me about his girl back home—a redhead who'd stolen his money and broken his heart. When it was time for me to go—when the exhaust was shooting from the back

of the bus and the faces of passengers began to appear in the windows behind the drenching rain—the wish to stay had hardened into longing. But I had a half-price ticket to Sydney in the morning and my tourist visa was about to expire.

"Y'all need to stay and drink with us," Jimmy said, as I stood and dropped a twenty on the bar. He picked it up and stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans. He downed his martini, put the toothpick between his teeth, and leaned in toward me, so close I could feel his boozy breath in my eyelashes. I slipped off the olive and held it between my teeth, then passed it back to him in an almost-kiss.

"You're still wet," he said. He slipped off his rain slicker.

"Don't give her that, you loser," Ray said.

"Easy boy," Jimmy said. Then he shrugged and slipped the coat back over his own shoulders. I stuck my tongue out at Ray and walked from the bar into the rain and got on the bus.

Everywhere in Sydney I saw people I knew. I'd step out of an underground station into the sun, and there would be a girl from my freshman dorm, sitting at a bus stop, or the married man I'd been with in London the year before, ducking into a cab. My arm would shoot into the air to flag them down, then when they turned toward me, the people I knew vanished into the puzzled faces of strangers. The idea of going home was always with me, but there were good reasons not to. My father had moved out again, before I'd left, and I suspected this time it was for good. "At some point things have to be admitted," was what he'd said, not to my mother but to me. I knew I was making it easy for him, staying away, giving up the cause, but the time and distance had muted my sense of responsibility. It had lulled me into believing my mother might be only heartsick and sad, not despairing, not desperate.

I moved into a flat with three German girls who'd been backpacking around the world together for a year. They hardly spoke English and that made it easy; there was no pretending we would take up as friends. I signed up at a temp agency—one that didn't check work visas and paid in cash every Friday. The agency found me a six-month assignment, typing for an insurance company in the city. The work was dull but the money was good and I buckled into it. In my spare time I renewed my long-standing self-improvement campaign. I quit smoking and stayed out of the bars; I worked on my typing speed; I wrote down words I didn't know on yellow legal pads and looked them up in the dictionary in the library on my way home. From the library I'd walk through the park, past the pub at Woolloomooloo and up over the hill to King's Cross. I'd buy myself a falafel and sit at the fountain in the square, watching the hookers in the doorways, the backpackers and tourists and solitary businessmen moving in and out of the strip joints and clubs, the restaurants and shops and seedy bars.

I was taken up in the change of seasons, the shift from the misty rains of May into the flat gray cold of what was summer back home. Then the holidays approached and the days began to lengthen and grow hot and expectant. On the last day of my typing job, I took the long way home through the park and stopped at the railing overlooking Sydney Harbor. The Opera House glowed white and magnificent in the distance, the water glistened, and a full blue moon floated low in the sky. I was filled up with a vast emptiness, a glorious freedom, and as always I was careful to stay there and

treasure it, to take it all in. But what can you do with a feeling like that? It was like other solitary moments during those years of traveling—it was the Himalayas at dusk after a cold day walking alone, it was the deck of a freighter on the Adriatic Sea at sunrise, it was Paris under a velvet snowfall. It was manufactured and overly private and tiresome. The other murkier moments meant more, finally, the dramas that began for the most part in bars, when the swirling motion of the evening would straighten itself and alight on a human form and there was suddenly the possibility not just of desire, and of being desired, but of a story of poverty or addiction or betrayal. There was the promise of some new knowledge—the shape of an ear, the smell of musk—or a shift in one's view of oneself in the world.

I started walking again, fast now through the park, and when I got to the bar at Woolloomooloo I went right in, sat down on an empty stool, and ordered myself a pint. Bob Dylan was on the jukebox. I sang along to "Like a Rolling Stone" and ran my hands over the smooth wood of the bar. I thought I heard my name, but I was done with phantoms and I kept my head steady. I cupped my beer between my hands. Then there was the heat of a body behind me, and sudden hands on my shoulders, and I turned and it was Jimmy.

"Hey, Catherine," he said. He took the seat on one side of me and Ray took the seat on the other. I turned toward Ray. He looked at me deadpan and stuck out his tongue. I stuck out mine and we both laughed, as if this was the way we'd greeted each other every Friday night for a decade. It encouraged me, Ray's laughter, but it unnerved me, too. He was so ugly, so private, until his face was thrown open with that laugh. Then he was all teeth and bright eyes, his forehead wrinkling like linen. What I learned, though, was that he could close down again in an instant and make me wonder what I'd done.

Jimmy opened a tab on Ray's dad's card and ordered us all martinis, and we started drinking hard and fast. Ray began to talk.

"So this girl, Jasmine, back in Raleigh. The reason we're here?" He said it like a question. "Her house was next to mine growing up. Jimmy's was three doors down. She was just punky, a tomboy. Then she lets her hair grow out and she has these green eyes that look like contacts. Junior year in high school, she gets a '67 Mustang convertible for her birthday and we paint it up for her. Yellow like she asked for.

"Yellow like lady's slipper," was what she said."

"She was into flowers and shit," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, but only yellow," Ray said. "She planted up her whole front yard with them—roses and tulips and whatever. They even wrote it up in the paper, with her picture and all in a yellow dress. Then she went off to Brown and her mom sold the house and we didn't see her for a while. Until bingo. She turns up last summer on the Cape, and she's still got the car. Jimmy was down in Miami working on a boat so it was just me and Jasmine, staying up all night doing coke, driving around in the Mustang. And in the back seat she's got all these pots she made on a potting wheel in school, like dozens of them, all planted up with yellow flowers."

Ray stared straight ahead as he talked, at the orderly rows of bottles lined up on the bar. He paused and took a swig of his martini.

"So what happened?" I said.

"Well so she transfers to Carolina, right, for senior year? And we spend the whole year pretty much together, and we're talking about moving to New York after graduation. I was dealing, so I knew I could get us an apartment and everything. Then right after finals, she takes five thousand bucks out of the stash in my room and splits. She just drives her car out to California and hooks up with some professor dude—he's ancient, like forty, and he's gotten a job out there—and the way I find out about the whole deal is she sends me a postcard."

"My God, there must have been signs," I said to Ray. "To just take off and leave like that."

"Maybe. But I never had times like that with anybody," Ray said.

"Except me," Jimmy said.

"Even you, Jimmy my boy."

I'd been listening to Ray with my elbows up on the bar and my chin in my hand, with the intensity that can come over you when you've had a lot to drink. His story seemed strange and sad and unforgettable. While Ray talked, Jimmy kept the drinks coming and he let the back of his hand fall against my arm on the bar. He let his thigh rub against my knee beneath it. This seemed to be the arrangement. With the drinks and the roving hands and the sweet eyes and the good looks, Jimmy's role was to draw people to the two of them, and Ray's—with his stories and his mournful eyes—was to keep them there. He would keep us there until finally we could not bear to hear the story again, then Jimmy would rescue us, with a drink or a song or a wild run in the dark through the park.

"Fucking A!" Jimmy said now from the jukebox. He slapped his hands against the glass and dropped in some coins. Neil Young's "Sugar Mountain" came on and he came and sat close beside me and Ray stopped talking while Jimmy and I sang. The song was suddenly something that was ours alone—we both knew every single line—and Ray would not join in. When we pressed him he said, "I don't sing," as if singing were a habit he'd long since outgrown.

Jimmy and I sang it over and over, and after a while Ray and his story seemed to recede until there was only Jimmy and me and those lyrics and the smoky blue glory of the bar. My final memory of that first night is of standing at the jukebox at last call, trying hard to fit a quarter into the slot so we could sing that song one last time. The next morning, I woke up fully dressed under the covers with my shoes placed neatly next to the bed. There was no obvious evidence of intimacy—no chafing or fluids or foreign smells. There wasn't a phone number either, nothing inked on my palm or scribbled on a napkin and tucked into my sock. I spent the day sleeping off my hang-over and waking from time to time to wonder how I might track them down—Jimmy and Ray—I didn't know their last names. When I finally got up and showered, it was late afternoon, and the German girls were watching TV. I started a letter to my mother. I wrote things I knew she'd like; I'd saved some money, I was getting along with my roommates, I was enjoying the neighborhood—all the shops, the square, the outdoor cafés. She didn't need to know that it was the seedy heart of the red light dis-

trict, that the streets were lined with drug dealers and prostitutes and strip joints and bars. I started a letter to my father and crumpled it up and threw it away. It was the first of many letters to him that I started and never finished, or finished and never sent. I was afraid to lose the closeness we'd had, but contact with him seemed duplicitous—an encouragement or even a betrayal.

At six o'clock, Jimmy lumbered in through the open door of the apartment with a tall potted plant held against his chest. The trunk was flung over his shoulder and the branches swept along the carpet behind him. He dropped the plant to the ground, spilling potting soil onto the worn white shag. His eyes were closed to half slits and there was a look of deep concentration on his face. He seemed especially large in the narrow white room and his cheeks were full of color beside the pale German girls, who carefully moved their eyes from the television set to him.

"What are you doing there, sir?" I said.

" 'Liverin' you a gif," he said, and he walked out the door. I went to the window and watched him. He staggered across the street into the lobby of the old Rex Hotel and emerged again with a plant under each arm. Then he was back in the apartment to deliver them, and still the Germans said nothing. When he left again, they began to murmur amongst themselves, and when he returned with two more plants, they smiled at him and then at me and they actually laughed.

He made a dozen trips, each time pinching a plant or two without anyone seeming to notice and dropping them heavily in the center of our living room floor. Finally he sat down hard on a bare patch of carpet, crossed his legs Indian style, and gave me a triumphant grin made up of perfect white teeth. Then he closed his eyes and his body tipped backward and his head landed on the ground with a thump.

He was too heavy to move. All we could do was straighten his legs and lay his arms over his chest. Later, when the German girls had gone to sleep, I brought out a pillow and blanket and lay down next to him. His shirt was pulled up out of his jeans and I put my palm on his stomach and touched the fuzzy blond hairs around his belly button. His stomach was not exactly fat, but it was not so firm as to suggest vanity or self-discipline, two qualities that at that time I found unpleasant in a man. I ran the back of my hand over his sunburned cheek. He smelled of booze and smoke and the kind of aftershave frat boys wore in college. It was a smell that reminded me of fast, haphazard sex.

I curled into him, into the sheer size of his body. There was heat in the places where our bodies touched and the moment seemed simple and absolutely complete. It stayed that way between us. I never knew what he thought about most things, whether he had grave opinions about the economy or the nature of men or the existence of God. The things he knew about—football, sailboats, the business of manufacturing heavy equipment—couldn't power a conversation between us. We were rarely alone and we were almost always drunk, so there was never a requirement to get to know each other in an essential way; there was no imagined future. We were free of the heaviness I had so much of in college and later, when you announce to yourself and the world that you've met someone special and then you must stay the course.

You must whisper into the night and you must embrace his terrible flaws—the dandruff at his temples, his tendency to speak rudely to waitresses, his inclination to overdress.

With Jimmy it was simply about putting “Sugar Mountain” on the jukebox and letting our thighs touch under the bar. It was about talking to Ray and drinking and letting time pass without clutching it or measuring it. It wasn’t about ideas; it was about the weight and heat of a body against your own. I felt something like it again when I held my firstborn in my arms. The simple physical fact of her moved me—her button chin and the fleshy lobe of ear, her head smooth and blond as sand, her milky breath against my face.

After that first night, the Germans moved the plants onto the balcony of the apartment, and with muted hand gestures and apologetic smiles, made it clear they’d prefer it if Jimmy didn’t make a habit of passing out on our living room floor. So we took to passing out at the flat just off the square that Jimmy shared with Ray and a half-dozen other backpackers—mostly Kiwis on summer holidays—who came and went. I was happy in that scrappy flat—the stained green sofa, the tiny kitchenette stocked with beer and tomatoes and sometimes an avocado or a lime, the walk-in closet where Jimmy and Ray slept on bare mattresses that, laid end-to-end, reached the entire length of the room. There was a collection of empty whiskey bottles in one corner, two fishing poles in the other, and their open backpacks in the center, overflowing with clothes. Taped to the wall over Jimmy’s bed were photos of their trip so far; Jimmy and Ray in wet underwear beside a lake in the sun, Jimmy and Ray climbing a mountain trail in their loafers, Jimmy and Ray in their rain slickers, hitchhiking under a darkened sky.

We got drunk every night, mostly in the Cross, sometimes down at Woolloomooloo or The Rocks. We’d sleep until noon and then head out for lunch and start drinking all over again. I had enough money saved that I could have picked up a round or two from time to time, but they never once let me. The drinks were charged to one of their fathers’ cards, and the bills were taken care of back home.

Jimmy was a drinker without angst or moderation. He always said yes to the next one, and I was the same. It was not exactly that we set out to get drunk. It was that there was always the idea of that first drink in our minds, and when that one was gone, there was the idea of the next. Later it would work that way for me with babies, so that despite the burdens in it—the chaos and worry, the sleeplessness, the unqualified loss of freedom—when one child was weaned I was ready for the next, for the sweetness of a small hot body against my chest.

Ray was different. He got drunk when he set out to, did not when he did not intend to, and was often sober enough to remember the night and report back in the morning.

“Jesus, you puked on my fucking shoes,” he’d say to Jimmy, or “You hit the bartender in the eye with a paper airplane.”

“Did I?” Jimmy would ask me, grinning.

“Not that I remember,” I’d say, which was most always true.

When I was drunkest, Jimmy would get me onto the mattress, cover me in a blue sheet, and tuck it tight around me. He knew something about being kind to women. He opened doors for me, he held my hair out of my face when I threw up, he made me drink a glass of milk before bed. And when Jimmy was first to get bad at the bars, Ray and I would each take an arm over our shoulders and drag him home. He'd stand on the mattress with his shoulder propped against the wall and yell, "I wanna get drunk."

"Lay down," Ray would order. "You're already drunk."

"Am I?" Jimmy would say. Then he'd sink down and close his bloodshot eyes and sleep for fourteen hours straight. It was a routine they knew by heart, and I sensed that Ray took a deep pleasure in keeping Jimmy safe in the world. I never asked Jimmy what he studied in college, or what he planned to do when the trip was over, or whether he'd ever been in love. It was Ray I wanted to understand. Ray lived right on the edge of ugly but to talk to him was to want to heal him or win him. At the bars, sometimes he ignored me, or coldly put up with me as if I were a wart he might someday burn away. Other times he sat up close and talked to me about Jasmine, telling me the same stories over and over again. For years I carried around a picture in my head of Jasmine driving fast along a coast road in her yellow convertible, her red hair flying out behind her, her back seat filled with flowers. It was a picture that could bring on a tightness in my chest, a vague longing to be an original, a girl who could win love absolutely and then walk away. When Ray spoke of her it was with reverence and regret; he had not forgiven her but he had not given her up either. Something about that made me want to make him see other women in the world; it made me want to make him see me.

On Christmas Day we planned a picnic on the beach. We took the ferry over to Manly early in the morning when the beach was empty and the air was still damp. Ray went off to the boardwalk and came back with three dozen clams in a bucket and a gallon jug of red wine. He opened the clams with his pocketknife and we ate them one after another, washing them down with wine straight from the bottle. By noon the beach was packed and it was so hot you couldn't walk on the sand. Ray went off again and came back with bread and cheese, peaches, pistachios, and a case of Victoria Bitter. Later, the German girls came by, pale and strong in their one-piece suits, and the Kiwis arrived with another case of beer. We assembled for a game of football—gridiron, the Kiwis called it—American style.

I can still feel myself in that day, my stomach flat and brown in an orange bikini, my hair wet down my back, the way I could sense my own ribs under my skin. The sun was hot on my head as I bent for the snap, ready to sprint after the ball. I didn't catch a single pass, and Ray traded me for one of the German girls who caught one and scored. But I didn't care. With every drink I became more beautiful in my own mind and the day grew more perfect. Later I would throw up over the railing of the ferry in the wind. I would pass out on the couch in the flat with a cigarette in my hand and burn a hole in the upholstery, and I would find, in the morning, dark spots of sunburn high on my cheeks that took years of creams and gels to take away. But in

the place in my memory where that day lives on, nothing was damaged. Nothing was lost.

By dusk everyone else had gone and I sat between Jimmy and Ray under the changing sky and watched the water go from green to indigo to an oily black. In the half-dark, we staggered into the huge surf. I dove, stayed low to the sand and let the waves beat in my ears and sweep over me. I went through every wave, and I never ran out of breath. I might have been afraid out there in the waves, but I wasn't. That whole time was like that; I might have been worried about my health or my reputation or my safety but I never was. I was protected and drunk and happy, and if there is room for regret it is not for the time we wasted but that it ended too soon. In February, when the Kiwis were leaving Sydney to go back home, Jimmy and Ray threw them a going-away party in the flat. I imagined later that it was the night I lost them, the night that the trip around Australia in the green van—up through Queensland and the Gold Coast to the hot wastelands of Darwin and the white beaches of Perth—became a journey that would take place without me.

What I remember about that night is Jimmy with a threadbare undershirt over his square shoulders and how we ripped it, not in a rage or a passion but because there'd been a tiny hole above the right nipple, and I began to tear and everyone joined in and then someone poured a beer over our heads. At some point in the night the German girls came by—three steady girls with thick calves, short skirts, and high heels. I remember that when they arrived I had a paper bag over my head; someone had cut holes in it so I could see and breathe.

When almost everyone had gone and I was edging toward a blackout, I found myself in the walk-in closet on the wrong side of the room on the wrong mattress—with Ray. We were sitting cross-legged, facing each other, our knees touching, and Ray was holding a fishing pole across his lap. Then he was reaching his fingers out toward me and as I raised mine to meet them, he looked right at me, he leaned in toward me, and we were caught up in a kiss. It was gentle at first, almost a question, then it grew more urgent, until his lips against mine were hard and necessary. Jimmy was suddenly standing over us. *Hey!* he said, laughing at first like it was a joke he might have been in on. Then *hey!* again, then *hey!* a third time, loudly, with his hand pressing the ball of my shoulder away from Ray. So we stopped. Ray whispered something to me as we pulled away from each other, some words that I understood and cherished and then forgot—and that I can never get back.

I woke the next day on the mattress next to Jimmy. The afternoon sun filtered in through the doorway and fell on his face. The circles under his eyes were purple as dusk, and he seemed impossibly dear, the more so because I was afraid I'd lost him. At the same time, there was a small, stubborn part of me that wanted Ray to acknowledge the thing that had happened between us, that wanted him to make it happen again. It was a part of me I had not yet begun to understand—the part in the habit of expecting attention from men under the most extraordinary circumstances. Not just the first glow of desire, of glossy hair and full lips, but the whole messy miracle of love. It was not that I wanted the entrapments that come along with love, or that I would promise to offer it in return. It was that I believed that once a man knew me,

he would see how different I was from an everyday girl—how forthright and clever and secretly kind—and he would find me indispensable.

It was a habit that persisted through heartbreak and havoc, through years of evidence to the contrary. Then I was married, and there were glimmers of it sometimes—at the pool where my son takes his swimming lessons, at the grocery store when a bagboy pushed my extra cart to the car—but for the most part I became convinced I'd outgrown it. Then on a hot night in August we threw a dinner party for friends. The kids were at my in-laws for a long-awaited overnight, and afterward, when the wives had kissed me and thanked me and gone home to relieve babysitters, and the other husbands—three men I've known for a decade—had assembled for a game of poker, I sat down in the chair left empty by my husband who had promptly passed out on the couch. One arm was flung across his face and the other hung over the back of the sofa, so that from where I sat I could see his long fingers dangling there, I could see his clean, clipped nails.

The game progressed. There was bluffing and folding. There was whiskey and chain-smoking and there were outrageous bets scribbled onto cocktail napkins. There were forearms—handsome, hairy, manly extremities brushing against mine on the tabletop as we handled the cards. Then all at once there was a knee pressed purposefully against my thigh beneath the table. There were brown eyes intent on my face and breath hot against my ear. And beyond that, where my husband's arm had been, was only the back of the couch. There was no sign of the formidable wrist, the sturdy thumb, the callused, well-loved palm. There was no further sign of my husband in the room at all. I was on my own in the company of men with the makings of a straight in my hand, ace high. Desire was thumping in my chest and the instinct to win, to go forward with abandon, was shooting through me, across the back of my neck and down between my legs.

At the same time—reaching me through the fog of scotch and cards and sex—was the power of my own house. There was the china waiting to be put back in the hutch. There was the cabinet door threatening to come off its hinge and a stack of catalogues to sort and toss. There was the phone, the bulletin board, the family calendar—the command center of our domestic life. Down the hall were my children's rooms, their mattresses and pillows encased in special covers to keep the dust mites at bay. Those rooms where each night I checked breathing and the temperatures of foreheads, where I kissed the gentle dip between cheeks and ears.

The question that persists, that pursues me even now, is whether it was only the card I was dealt—the seven of spades—that saved me. That freed me to shift my legs into open space, to lay my cards down on the table in a fold, and with an unlikely pinch of resolve, take my leave.

Jimmy got a two-week job down at Rushcutter's Bay scraping the underside of a yacht. When he was working that first week, I imagined him there, drinking a Coke in the sun. On Friday, I bought two sandwiches and a six-pack and made my way down to the boat yard. The day was warm and bright and the bay was dotted with sails. Jimmy was there and so was Ray. They were fishing. They weren't sitting close to each other and they weren't talking, but there was something between them, some-

thing silent and male, both a history and a future, and I almost turned around and left.

"Hey," Jimmy said, when he saw me. He glanced at Ray.

"I brought beers," I said.

"We never drink when we fish," Ray said. There was a silence. Then he laughed and took two beers. He popped one open for Jimmy and one for himself. "They're biting today. That's damned sure," he said.

I opened myself a beer and sat down on the dock next to Jimmy. The wood was gray and splintered, the water green with moss. We sat in silence for a while and then Ray's line began to move. I stood up as they did, as Ray reeled in his line, a fish slick and panicked at the end of it. Jimmy picked the pliers out of the bait box and worked the hook out, while Ray held the fish and then dropped it in the bucket with three others. There was nothing for me to do but stand and watch.

They finished their beers and began to pack up their fishing gear.

"That Kiwi band's playing at Woolloomooloo a week from Saturday," I said to Ray.

Ray looked at Jimmy then, and something passed between them, something that had already been decided.

"We're gonna be heading north, actually," Jimmy said. "We got a van and all." His face was soft with apology as he said it, and I might imagine now that he touched my cheek or took my hand in his. But he did not. He knocked his elbow against mine and punched me gently in the arm. We were like that together sober—clumsy and halting and overtaken by silences it was Ray's job to fill. But Ray had already turned and was walking up the hill home.

The day they left, the sky came down low and dark. They had their rain slickers on. I was coatless and cold. Ray loaded the arsenal of booze they'd assembled for the trip into the back of the van while Jimmy and I stood on the sidewalk and watched.

"I could sleep in the front seat," I said finally.

"No fucking way," Ray said from the back of the van.

"Ah, c'mon Cath," Jimmy said. He cocked his head to the side and turned his lips down in a pout. Then he took off his slicker and laid it over my shoulders. It had started to rain.

Ray came and stood next to Jimmy. For one long minute, he looked right at me and the lines of his face softened. My nose began to tingle with emotion and I had to look away. He walked toward me, slipped his rain slicker off his shoulders and laid it over me, so that I was wearing both coats, one on top of the other. I didn't know then what he meant by it, and I don't know now, but I hope he meant that I was forgiven—for my secret greed, for wanting to be so universally loved.

When they'd heaved their backpacks into the van and closed the doors and waved and were gone, I stood alone for a moment on the sidewalk in the rain, excessively dry under two rain slickers—cherry-red and lined with fleece. Then I walked up to the flat and let myself in and surveyed the closet that had been their room. They'd left the photos behind and I peeled one off the wall, slipped it into my pocket, and headed out into the rain. I started walking in the opposite direction of home, in and out of

weather, into parts of the city I'd never been before, with my hands first in the pockets of one coat, then in the pockets of the other. As I walked, I thought about them hard—Jimmy and Ray—going over each episode in my mind, weighing and measuring, considering cause and effect. Not in an effort to shed the loss but to savor it, to shape it, to give it permanence.

READINGS

ANNE LAMOTT

Shitty First Drafts

NOW, PRACTICALLY EVEN BETTER NEWS than that of short assignments is the idea of shitty first drafts. All good writers write them. This is how they end up with good second drafts and terrific third drafts. People tend to look at successful writers, writers who are getting their books published and maybe even doing well financially, and think that they sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. I know some very great writers, writers you love who write beautifully and have made a great deal of money, and not *one* of them sits down routinely feeling wildly enthusiastic and confident. Not one of them writes elegant first drafts. All right, one of them does, but we do not like her very much. We do not think that she has a rich inner life or that God likes her or can even stand her. (Although when I mentioned this to my priest friend Tom, he said you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.)

Very few writers really know what they are doing until they've done it. Nor do they go about their business feeling dewy and thrilled. They do not type a few stiff warm-up sentences and then find themselves bounding along like huskies across the snow. One writer I know tells me that he sits down every morning and says to himself nicely, "It's not like you don't have a choice, because you do—you can either type or kill yourself." We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time. Now, Muriel Spark is said to have felt that she was taking dictation from God every morning—sitting there, one supposes, plugged into a Dictaphone, typing away, humming. But this is a very hostile and aggressive position. One might hope for bad things to rain down on a person like this.

For me and most of the other writers I know, writing is not rapturous. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts.

The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it

later. You just let this childlike part of you channel whatever voices and visions come through and onto the page. If one of the characters wants to say, "Well, so what, Mr. Poopy Pants?" you let her. No one is going to see it. If the kid wants to get into really sentimental, weepy, emotional territory, you let him. Just get it all down on paper, because there may be something great in those six crazy pages that you would never have gotten to by more rational, grown-up means. There may be something in the very last line of the very last paragraph on page six that you just love, that is so beautiful or wild that you now know what you're supposed to be writing about, more or less, or in what direction you might go—but there was no way to get to this without first getting through the first five and a half pages.

I used to write food reviews for *California* magazine before it folded. (My writing food reviews had nothing to do with the magazine folding, although every single review did cause a couple of canceled subscriptions. Some readers took umbrage at my comparing mounds of vegetable puree with various ex-presidents' brains.) These reviews always took two days to write. First I'd go to a restaurant several times with a few opinionated, articulate friends in tow. I'd sit there writing down everything anyone said that was at all interesting or funny. Then on the following Monday I'd sit down at my desk with my notes, and try to write the review. Even after I'd been doing this for years, panic would set in. I'd try to write a lead, but instead I'd write a couple of dreadful sentences, xx them out, try again, xx everything out, and then feel despair and worry settle on my chest like an x-ray apron. It's over, I'd think, calmly. I'm not going to be able to get the magic to work this time. I'm ruined. I'm through. I'm toast. Maybe, I'd think, I can get my old job back as a clerk-typist. But probably not. I'd get up and study my teeth in the mirror for a while. Then I'd stop, remember to breathe, make a few phone calls, hit the kitchen and chow down. Eventually I'd go back and sit down at my desk, and sigh for the next ten minutes. Finally I would pick up my one-inch picture frame, stare into it as if for the answer, and every time the answer would come: all I had to do was to write a really shitty first draft of, say, the opening paragraph. And no one was going to see it.

So I'd start writing without reining myself in. It was almost just typing, just making my fingers move. And the writing would be *terrible*. I'd write a lead paragraph that was a whole page, even though the entire review could only be three pages long, and then I'd start writing up descriptions of the food, one dish at a time, bird by bird, and the critics would be sitting on my shoulders, commenting like cartoon characters. They'd be pretending to snore, or rolling their eyes at my overwrought descriptions, no matter how hard I tried to tone those descriptions down, no matter how conscious I was of what a friend said to me gently in my early days of restaurant reviewing. "Annie," she said, "it is just a piece of *chicken*. It is just a bit of *cake*."

But because by then I had been writing for so long, I would eventually let myself trust the process—sort of, more or less. I'd write a first draft that was maybe twice as long as it should be, with a self-indulgent and boring beginning, stupefying descriptions of the meal, lots of quotes from my black-humored friends that made them sound more like the Manson girls than food lovers, and no ending to speak of. The

whole thing would be so long and incoherent and hideous that for the rest of the day I'd obsess about getting creamed by a car before I could write a decent second draft. I'd worry that people would read what I'd written and believe that the accident had really been a suicide, that I had panicked because my talent was waning and my mind was shot.

The next day, though, I'd sit down, go through it all with a colored pen, take out everything I possibly could, find a new lead somewhere on the second page, figure out a kicky place to end it, and then write a second draft. It always turned out fine, sometimes even funny and weird and helpful. I'd go over it one more time and mail it in.

Then, a month later, when it was time for another review, the whole process would start again, complete with the fears that people would find my first draft before I could rewrite it.

Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something—anything—down on paper. A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy.

What I've learned to do when I sit down to work on a shitty first draft is to quiet the voices in my head. First there's the vinegar-lipped Reader Lady, who says primly, "Well, *that's* not very interesting, is it?" And there's the emaciated German male who writes these Orwellian memos detailing your thought crimes. And there are your parents, agonizing over your lack of loyalty and discretion; and there's William Burroughs, dozing off or shooting up because he finds you as bold and articulate as a houseplant; and so on. And there are also the dogs: let's not forget the dogs, the dogs in their pen who will surely hurtle and snarl their way out if you ever *stop* writing, because writing is, for some of us, the latch that keeps the door of the pen closed, keeps those crazy ravenous dogs contained.

Quieting these voices is at least half the battle I fight daily. But this is better than it used to be. It used to be 87 percent. Left to its own devices, my mind spends much of its time having conversations with people who aren't there. I walk along defending myself to people, or exchanging repartee with them, or rationalizing my behavior, or seducing them with gossip, or pretending I'm on their TV talk show or whatever. I speed or run an aging yellow light or don't come to a full stop, and one nanosecond later am explaining to imaginary cops exactly why I had to do what I did, or insisting that I did not in fact do it.

I happened to mention this to a hypnotist I saw many years ago, and he looked at me very nicely. At first I thought he was feeling around on the floor for the silent alarm button, but then he gave me the following exercise, which I still use to this day.

Close your eyes and get quiet for a minute, until the chatter starts up. Then isolate one of the voices and imagine the person speaking as a mouse. Pick it up by the tail and drop it into a mason jar. Then isolate another voice, pick it up by the tail, drop it in the jar. And so on. Drop in any high-maintenance parental units, drop in any con-

tractors, lawyers, colleagues, children, anyone who is whining in your head. Then put the lid on, and watch all these mouse people clawing at the glass, jabbering away, trying to make you feel like shit because you won't do what they want—won't give them more money, won't be more successful, won't see them more often. Then imagine that there is a volume-control button on the bottle. Turn it all the way up for a minute, and listen to the stream of angry, neglected, guilt-mongering voices. Then turn it all the way down and watch the frantic mice lunge at the glass, trying to get to you. **Leave it down, and get back to your shitty first draft.**

A writer friend of mine suggests opening the jar and shooting them all in the head. But I think he's a little angry, and I'm sure nothing like this would ever occur to you.

Reading as a Writer

1. Can you identify with Lamott's experience of her writing process? If so, in what ways?
2. After you've finished a first draft, how do you feel? Relieved? Anxious? Do you always know what to do next? If not, how do you figure it out?
3. At the end of the essay, Lamott describes an exercise she uses to "quiet the voices" of doubt and distraction that prevent her from writing. What techniques or methods do you use to help focus on writing (and revising), if any?

RAYMOND CARVER

The Bath

SATURDAY AFTERNOON THE MOTHER DROVE to the bakery in the shopping center. After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child's favorite. The cake she chose was decorated with a spaceship and a launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars. The name SCOTTY would be iced on in green as if it were the name of the spaceship.

The baker listened thoughtfully when the mother told him Scotty would be eight years old. He was an older man, this baker, and he wore a curious apron, a heavy thing with loops that went under his arms and around his back and then crossed in front again where they were tied in a very thick knot. He kept wiping his hands on the front of the apron as he listened to the woman, his wet eyes examining her lips as she studied the samples and talked.

He let her take her time. He was in no hurry.

The mother decided on the spaceship cake, and then she gave the baker her name and her telephone number. The cake would be ready Monday morning, in plenty of time for the party Monday afternoon. This was all the baker was willing to say. No pleasantries, just this small exchange, the barest information, nothing that was not necessary.