DIVERGING

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Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Could we have chosen a more clichéd opening for our essays on divergence than these lines from Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"? No, probably not, but we chose them anyway, because the poem contains a surprise that many readers miss. Every person who quotes Frost with a self-congratulatory "and that has made all the difference" fails to recognize that "The Road Not Taken" actually pokes fun at people who tell such stories. Frost diverges from the expected because his poem about divergence is actually about the failure to diverge. He invites us to recognize how rarely people chart new paths.

Writing that's worth reading, like Frost's poem, offers its readers something new, something surprising, something unexpected. So to become a writer whose work is worth reading, you need to practice diverging from the tired, the familiar, and the conventional—from the roads always taken. We encourage you to cultivate habits of questioning and experimentation. Go ahead: ask "what if?" and see where your curiosity takes you.

The essays in this section invite divergent thinking while also diverging from one another. "The pen is mightier than the sword" is a commonplace, but is it true? Does laughter have a role in the serious business of academic writing? Are conventions something you can play with? In each essay, we invite you to consider what is made possible when you veer from the common path.

On Writing's Magical Powers

One of the most familiar claims about the power of writing is that "the pen is mightier than the sword." This saying conjures a world where ideas are more powerful than brute force and the work of writing outlasts the work of fighting. For an example we can turn to *The Iliad*: if it weren't for Homer's words having been put down in writing, the individual acts of treason or heroism in the Trojan War, and perhaps even the outcome of the war itself, would have been lost to the passage of time.

While we, too, believe that writing matters, we think the claim that "the pen is mightier than the sword" that just doesn't ring true. Examples of words perishing completely in the face of brute force abound. Take the burning of the library of Alexandria, which is said to have occurred anywhere from fifteen hundred to two thousand years ago—the exact date is unknown because no writing contemporaneous with the event has survived to the present day. More recently, there was the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad in the aftermath of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. Despite the fact that museum officials published impassioned pleas in advance of the invasion warning of this imminent cultural catastrophe, irreplaceable antiquities that recorded the earliest moments of human expression are now gone forever.

The more we thought about the relationship between language and power, the harder it became for us to come up with examples that supported the fanciful idea that the pen is indeed mightier than the sword. And that got us to wondering where this phrase came from. Our research yielded some surprising results.

To begin with, it turns out that the phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword" first appeared in a historical drama entitled *Richelieu; or, The Conspiracy*, written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton and published in 1839. In the second act of the play, Bulwer-Lytton has Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII's minister of state, discover a plot to remove Richelieu from power. Outraged, Richelieu has his servant Joseph bring him his two-handed broadsword. Looking the blade over and finding a familiar

notch on its edge, Richelieu recalls an earlier battle at Rochelle, where he brought the sword down on a helmeted English soldier and "shore him to the waist!" This same sword, which Richelieu remembers as being like "a toy—a feather" when he was young, is suddenly too heavy for the old man to lift. Collapsing into a chair, Richelieu says disconsolately, "a child could / Slay Richelieu now." Reminded by his servant that he has other weapons at his command, Richelieu takes up a pen and declares: "Beneath the rule of men entirely great / The pen is mightier than the sword."

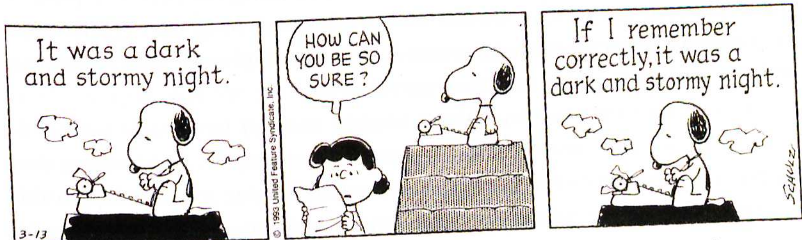
The original context changes the meaning, doesn't it?

The pen is not *always* mightier than the sword, as the cliché would have us believe. Rather, the pen can become mightier than the sword when it is used under the rule of men—such as Richelieu—who are "entirely great." *Entirely* great? Yes, that's what the line from the play actually says.

And what about when the pen is used by people with less power?

The conclusion of the play answers this hypothetical question decisively. Richelieu triumphs because he has gained possession of a secret message meant for those who are conspiring against him. The writers and the intended recipients of this message, having been betrayed by the pen, face a range of dire fates—banishment, imprisonment, death. And Richelieu? He remains in power. Thus the pen really is mightier than the sword, if the pen is in the hands of someone with the power to destroy those who are less powerful.

While we were looking into this, we also discovered that "the pen is mightier than the sword" isn't the only phrase of Bulwer-Lytton's that history has preserved. Bulwer-Lytton's words, uncited, appear in Charles Schulz's classic depiction of the struggling writer:



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It turns out that the first sentence of Snoopy's ever-unfinished novel is a truncated version of the opening sentence of Bulwer-Lytton's three-volume novel *Paul Clifford* (1830), which begins:

> It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.

The passage of time obviously hasn't been kind to Bulwer-Lytton. Though he was a prolific, best-selling author during the nineteenth century, his works go unread today, and, as we've seen here, the two pieces of his writing that do remain in circulation do so without referencing his name. Indeed, were it not for San Jose State University's annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, in which writers the world over compete to produce the worst opening line to an unwritten novel, it is doubtful that Bulwer-Lytton's name would be raised anywhere other than in scholarly discussions of nineteenth-century literary production. However, because of the Bulwer-Lytton contest, the author of the statement "the pen is mightier than the sword" lives on as a punch line to a long-standing joke among writers, his name synonymous with prose that is pretentious, overblown, contorted, and clichéd.

One could conclude, after looking at the arc of Bulwer-Lytton's career, tracking from respected author to punch line, that whatever might his pen had was largely, perhaps even completely, out of his hands. But it turns out that what holds true for Bulwer-Lytton holds true for all writers. It doesn't matter who is holding the pen or typing at the keyboard; the writing device still produces writing that is susceptible to being misread, misunderstood, or misinterpreted. Why? Because writing is always at the mercy of its readers.

To say that there is no writing mighty enough to control how it is read is not to say, however, that writing has *no* power. The writing you do has the power to change you and to change your relationship to the world. Indeed, this is why we think writing is so important; it allows you to

explore the inner workings of your mind, the world, and your place in the world. We don't believe that using your writing to conduct such explorations will make *anything* possible. But, we do believe it will better prepare you, day by day, to live in and with a world of ever-unfolding possibilities.

Practice Session One

Writing

At the end of "On Writing's Magical Powers," we assert that writing is capable of changing you and your relationship to the world. That sounds good, but is it true? Have you ever had an experience of this kind with writing—either writing as activity or writing as end product? Do you know someone who has?

If you have had such an experience, write an account of it, and if you can, cite the writing that had this effect. Be as specific as possible about how the writing—the process, the product, or both—changed you and your relationship to the world.

If you are writing about someone else's experience, begin by interviewing your acquaintance, finding out as much as you can about how writing—either as activity or as end product—worked its magic. Then write up an account of your interviewee's experience. Cite from both the interview and the writing that was transformative.

In your account, reflect on whether the experience you've described is reproducible. Can it be practiced? Can it be learned? Are there conditions that have to be in play for it to be possible?

Practice Session Two

Researching

Conventional wisdom has it that aspiring writers should avoid clichés . . . like the plague! But for this exercise, we invite you to do as we've done in "On Writing's Magical Powers." Choose a saying, a phrase, or a slogan that gets repeated habitually in your environment. Research the origins of your selection. Where does your exploration lead you? Spend at least 30 minutes writing about what your selection means now and what it meant originally.

EXPLORE

Writing's magical powers allow us to make meaning out of chaos. Mark Bowden discusses a scientist's effort to collect data on his every bodily function in the finest detail. Geoff Dyer ponders three instances where his criminal activities escaped detection. Mac McClelland contemplates the horrific consequences of a relative's mental illness. In all of these pieces, the authors seek to make sense of the past in order to better understand the present.

Bowden, Mark. "The Measured Man." *Atlantic.* July 2012. Web.

Dyer, Geoff. "My Secret Life of Crime." *Guardian.* 30 June 2009. Web.

McClelland, Mac. "Schizophrenic. Killer. My Cousin." *Mother Jones.* May/June 2013. Web.

On Laughter

"So, two writing teachers walk into a bar."

Could a joke that starts this way ever be funny?

What about this joke:

"How many writing teachers does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

Or a joke that begins,

"This writing teacher shows up at the Pearly Gates . . ."?

It all depends, right?

And not just on whatever the next line is, but also on the context—on who's telling the joke, how they're telling it, where they're telling it, and why they're telling it—and, of course, on who's listening and/or watching and/or reading the joke. Humor is, we would argue, the most contextually dependent and the most contextually sensitive of all the possible speech acts.

This is one reason why humor is the least likely of the habits of the creative mind to be taught in school: since it involves playing with audience expectations, it has the potential to both fail (that is, not to be funny) and to offend (that is, to violate the audience's values) at the same time. Another reason humor has no formal place in education is because it just seems inherently less serious and less important than other forms of communication. We want to argue, though, that humor (in terms of having a sense of humor and of having the ability to be humorous) can play a central role in the creative process. How? When you successfully disrupt audience expectations by saying something surprising—perhaps by making connections between things that seem disconnected, or by pointing out an incongruity, or by unsettling typical ways of thinking about and seeing the world—you make it possible for your audience to shift perspectives, to see things in a new way. In our view, practicing being funny is a way to practice seeing a situation from multiple perspectives; it's also a way to practice gauging just how flexible your audience's expectations are.

Sometimes you will be wrong in your estimation of how much your audience will bend. One of us once made a joke in a paper in graduate school, and in the margin of the paper, next to the joke, the teacher wrote: "Humor has no place in academic discourse."

No place? Really?

It is true that academic research on humor is unlikely to produce riotous laughter. It's also true that the tone and style of academic writing in general tends to fall somewhere on a spectrum that extends from the dispassionate to the gravely serious. But here's the thing: no government, religion, or tradition—not even the hallowed tradition of academic discourse—is powerful enough to completely suppress the desire to laugh. And there is *no* situation about which someone somewhere isn't prepared to make a joke.

We can imagine the incredulous response to our claim that a joke can be made in or about *any* situation. We've presented this statement dispassionately, as a fact. Now let's test it.

How about death? Can death be funny? Can the certainty of our own mortality evoke laughter?

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare's well-known and (some would say) quite silly play about star-crossed lovers, Romeo's best friend, the witty Mercutio, ends up being stabbed during a standoff with a rival clan. When Romeo tries to determine whether his friend has been injured during the brandishing of swords, Mercutio won't give him a straight answer:

> Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

A *grave* man? *Really?*

Yes, Shakespeare really does have his character make a joke about his own death while he is dying. Not only that, Shakespeare has Mercutio resort to a pun, which some define as the lowest form of humor, to both tell and not tell Romeo about the seriousness of his injury. Moments later, Mercutio exits and, we later learn, does indeed die of his wound. *Exeunt*, pursued by a pun.

But, you object, this is just a play. It's not real life. Real people wouldn't crack a joke when Death is *really* at their door, would they?

On August 3, 2012, the comedian Tig Notaro walked onto the stage of the Largo, a comedy club in Los Angeles, and said to the audience:

> Good evening. Hello. I have cancer. How are you? Hi, how are you? Is everybody having a good time? I have cancer.

> How are you? Ah, it's a good time. Diagnosed with cancer. [Sighs] It feels good. Just diagnosed with cancer. Oh, God.

There was some uncomfortable laughter. Notaro repeated herself. More laughter followed, but it was the laughter of disbelief, of nervousness, of uncertainty. She can't be serious, can she? This seems beyond the pale, making jokes at the expense of people who really do have cancer—who would make light of such a thing?

As the routine continued, the audience slowly realized that Notaro was *both* telling the truth *and* joking about her diagnosis. She repeatedly paused to speak directly to audience members who didn't know how to respond to what she was telling them: a man who was laughing too much; a woman who was deeply troubled by what she was hearing.

> It's OK. It's going to be OK. [Pause] It might not be OK. But I'm just saying, it's OK. You're going to be OK. [Pause] I don't know what's going on with me.

Louis CK was the headliner that night and was standing just offstage during Notaro's performance. Here's an excerpt from his description of what it was like to be there:

> I can't really describe it but I was crying and laughing and listening like never in my life. Here was this small woman standing alone against death and simply reporting where her mind had been. . . .
>
> The show was an amazing example of what comedy can be. A way to visit your worst fears and laugh at them. Tig took us to a scary place and made us laugh there. Not by distracting us from the terror but by looking right at it and just turning to us and saying, "Wow. Right?" She proved that everything is funny. And has to be. And she could only do this by giving us her own death as an example. So generous.

Louis CK is a comedian, of course, so one could argue that his response isn't typical. To him it was "one of the greatest standup performances" ever, but what about the audience? Did the audience members ever

get over being disturbed by the fact that Notaro was entertaining them with her immediate experience of having death at her door?

We invite you to listen to the entire thirty-minute show and judge for yourself.

At this point, Notaro, Louis CK, and Shakespeare have probably convinced you that one can joke about one's own death; but that's different, you might say, from making a joke about a situation in which *others* have suffered and died. Surely no one would do that, at least not right away.

How much time has to pass before awful, unbearable, or unthinkable events can be redeployed in the service of comedy? What is the etiquette when one is making a joke that references the deaths of others? How soon is too soon?

In *The Aristocrats,* a documentary we admire, the filmmakers set out to understand the history of one particularly vulgar and offensive joke that comedians tell each other. The trigger for the documentary? The editors of the *Onion* and many comedy headliners were attending a roast of Hugh Hefner at the Friars Club in New York City on November 4, 2001; the event was being filmed by Comedy Central for future broadcast. Then this happened:

The comic Gilbert Gottfried took his turn at the podium and made a joke that alluded to 9/11. There was a nervous response, some boos, and then shouts of "too soon!" With the ruins of the Twin Towers still being sifted through for human remains at the time, Gottfried had clearly crossed the invisible line of his audience's expectations about what constituted an appropriate topic for the occasion.

Gottfried's response?

He shifted gears and went straight into a joke known to all professional comics, a set piece that can be infinitely expanded between the setup (a family enters a talent agency) and the punch line ("We call the act, 'The Aristocrats'!"). Soon enough, the room was filled with laughter; someone on the stage laughed so hard he fell out of his chair. Gottfried reminded everyone in the room that comedy's function is to make it possible to laugh in response to that which is surprising, incongruous, or dissonant, and that this necessarily includes laughing at the unimaginably horrific things that humans do to one another.

In the documentary about this joke (which includes footage of Gottfried's Friars Club appearance), no one gets hurt. There are no

vivid scenes of murder or rape or humiliation. There's no nudity and no simulation of sex acts. There isn't, in other words, any of the kind of visual material that is common fare in movie theaters, tv shows, and music videos. All there is to see is comic after comic telling the same vulgar, obscene joke, though the language and the shape of the joke change with each telling. And after hearing this joke told over and over, we come to understand that the best jokes help us to see incongruities in the world and in ourselves, to make sense of nonsense, and to connect things that seem unconnectable. Or to put this another way, jokes give us access to the powers of the imagination in all of its unruliness.

But what about in the realm of the essay? Does humor have any place in writing that is research driven? Investigative? Exploratory? Thoughtful? We believe that humor provides a vital role in the deliberative process: when one line of thinking leads to an impasse, the introduction of humor can serve to open up access to another plane of thought, one in which the impasse gets reframed as the occasion for laughter. But we don't want to argue the point; we want you to be the judge.

In "Fear of a Black President," Ta-Nehisi Coates gives a number of examples of how, prior to Barack Obama's election to the presidency, the idea of a black president had a long history of being joked about by black comics. Coates then offers an interpretation of the function of these jokes, after which Coates makes a joke that riffs on his own interpretation:

> Just beneath the humor [about the impossibility of a black president] lurked a resonant pain, the scars of history, an aching doubt rooted in the belief that "they" [white people] would never accept us [black people]. And so in our Harlems and Paradise Valleys, we invoked a black presidency the way a legion of 5-foot point guards might invoke the dunk—as evidence of some great cosmic injustice, weighty in its import, out of reach.
>
> And yet Spud Webb lives.

This last line, we maintain, is a joke Coates introduces to move his deliberation on the significance of Obama's election forward, from what was once generally believed to be a laughable impossibility to what is now a

fact. His reference to Spud Webb enables this forward movement, but the joke Coates makes and the forward motion it is meant to produce only succeed if the reader knows both that Spud Webb had a distinguished career as a professional basketball player, despite being only five feet seven inches tall, and that he was such a good dunker that he won the NBA Slam Dunk Contest in 1986. The first set of jokes about black presidents and short dunkers alleviates the pain of an impossible situation; then there's the reality of Obama's election; after that, Coates reminds us of Spud Webb, which makes a joke about the jokers' sense of what is impossible. In this way, Coates shows how humor, deftly deployed, unsettles complacency, points out inconsistencies, and plays with audience expectations, all to shake us out of our usual patterns of thought so that we can see things differently. When the function of humor is understood in this way, it's hard to see how humor wouldn't have a central place in curiosity-driven, creative work.

Practice Session One

Reading

In the preceding essay, we've offered one example of how humor can be used in a piece of nonfiction prose to advance an argument—an example taken from Ta-Nehisi Coates's "Fear of a Black President" (p. 274). Now we'd like you to go through Coates's entire essay and pull out moments where you believe he is being humorous. The humor need not be a knee-slappingly funny joke to warrant attention: indeed, we'd like you to be able to tease out instances in which his use of humor occurs at the level of word choice or manifests itself as a nuanced phrase or transition. [This exercise may also be profitably done with Jill Lepore's "*The Last Amazon: Wonder Woman Returns*" (p. 300) or any of the readings in the Explore section on page 266.]

Once you have found at least three instances of humor in one of the readings, spend 60 minutes or more writing a piece that explains how the humor works in each of the examples you've selected. After you've completed your analysis, reflect on what it has revealed to you about the author's habits of mind. Is there a pattern that emerges from your examples? Do your examples support the hypothesis that humor can play a more significant role in the creative process than just lightening the mood?

Practice Session Two

Revising

We believe that humor has heuristic value during the writing process. We encounter a problem and can't think our way out of it; what can we do? What if, when this happens—as it must, because all writing involves getting stuck—we opted to make some sort of contextual joke, like the one Ta-Nehisi Coates made when he introduced Spud Webb? What would happen next?

For this exercise, take one of the pieces you wrote for a different section of this book, a piece in which you got blocked or stalled or repeated yourself at one or more points, and see what happens when you introduce a contextual joke at one of those moments in the piece. Then write for at least 30 minutes beyond the point where you've introduced the contextual joke. Where do you end up?

When you are happy with the results of your effort, go back and try your hand at turning the contextual joke into a more conventional transitional sentence or paragraph.

Practice Session Three

Writing

While humor is rare in academic writing, it is one of the primary modes for communicating online. What is its function in this other medium?

Drawing together your favorite memes and viral videos, put together a working file of the humorous material that you've encountered in your online life. Feel free to include text exchanges, Facebook posts, tweets, snapchats—whatever best represents the various functions that humor plays for you and your community of friends. Then explore what the evidence you've collected suggests about the values and expectations of this group of people. Finally, write an essay that explains the various functions humor plays in your online community.

Practice Session Four

Writing

For this exercise, we've adapted one of the essay prompts from the University of Chicago's 2013 application: Write out your favorite joke and then explain the joke without ruining it.

EXPLORE

Our suggested readings all show that laughter and insight can occur at the same time. Alice Dreger confronts the reality that there are people who hire dwarves for entertainment. Tig Notaro goes onstage and does a standup routine about having just been diagnosed with breast cancer. Walker Percy wonders how nonsensical versions of familiar metaphors still manage to convey meaning. And David Sedaris reflects on the jokes people tell in public.

Dreger, Alice. "Lavish Dwarf Entertainment." *Bioethics Forum*. 25 Mar. 2008. Web.

Notaro, Tig. "Too Soon?" *This American Life*. 5 Oct. 2012. Podcast.

Percy, Walker. "Metaphor as Mistake." *Sewanee Review* 66.1 (Winter 1958). 79–99. Web.

Sedaris, David. "The Learning Curve." *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. New York: Little, Brown, 2000. 83–96. Print.

On Playing with Conventions

Public speeches are, by definition, governed by convention. Take graduation speeches. They all more or less follow this predictable arc: the opening joke, the personal anecdote, praise for students' achievements, warnings about the challenges to come, and wise final words of encouragement about achieving success with integrity. Everybody in the audience knows that life after graduation is not that simple, but graduations are celebratory occasions, so it just doesn't do to point out the magnitude of the problems graduates are likely to face or the difficulties they will have in traveling the road ahead.

When the conventions are so rigid, is creativity possible? We've worked with many beginning creative writers who believe that all constraints, guidelines, and requirements are disabling intrusions; we even had a student who refused to read anyone else's work, published or unpublished, on the grounds that such exposure would taint the purity of his own writing. But thinking of creativity as the evasion of conventions is a mistake; creativity, we maintain, is better thought of as a way of playing with and within conventions.

David Foster Wallace's 2005 commencement speech at Kenyon College illustrates this creative play beautifully. Wallace began conventionally enough, with a parable about how much the young still have to learn:

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"

Given the occasion, Wallace acknowledged that his audience was likely to see the point of the parable as introducing the moment when the "wise old fish" behind the podium shared his wisdom with the "younger fish" in the audience: "the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about." Wallace didn't sound much like

a wise elder when he told the graduating seniors and their families that he wanted to talk about "the value of the totally obvious." That's an odd topic for a commencement speech, but Wallace insisted that his unconventional choice made sense. "In the day-to-day trenches of adult existence," he said, "banal platitudes can have a life-or-death importance."

Life-or-death importance?

Coming from a more conventional writer, those words might have served only as a laugh line, an over-the-top exaggeration. But Wallace wasn't kidding. He was utterly, disarmingly sincere. Having posed the problem of our numbness to our own lives and surroundings, as well as our tendency "to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self," he challenged his audience to consider other options:

> Twenty years after my own graduation, I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed.

In other words, we can put our brains on their default settings and glide along thinking we are the center of the universe, or we can be deliberate about how we think and what we pay attention to. Choosing to pay attention takes practice and effort. It is, Wallace stated at the end of his address, "unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out." And this means, he concluded, that "yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really *is* the job of a lifetime." The ultimate value of an education, he continued,

> has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:

"This is water."

"This is water."

When Wallace sat down to write this commencement speech, he knew the basic conventions of the genre, but in order to write a *good* speech, a *memorable* speech, he needed the habits of a curious and creative mind. He gave the families of the Kenyon graduates what they came for by hitting most of the marks of a conventional graduation speech—the parable, the words of wisdom, and so on. But he also invited his audience to join him in conscious reflection about the artificiality of those conventions when they are deployed without creativity, and about the authenticity that can be generated when those same conventions are used to say something unexpected. He asked all those present to contemplate the possibility that the adult lives these graduates were about to commence could well become so consuming in their dull everydayness that experience might stop being meaningful.

Wallace didn't end his speech on this ominous note, though: this is a commencement speech, after all. Instead, almost in spite of himself, he offered the audience some wise advice—that it's possible to become aware again of what's real and essential, and that reacquiring and maintaining this awareness never stops being work. Or to put it another way, he encouraged his audience to practice the habits of the creative mind, day in and day out, while knowing that the practice never ends.

. . . . .

David Foster Wallace's speech is worth reading and listening to in full, so we'd like you to find a copy of *This Is Water* at the library, or find transcripts and audio files of the speech online. We recommend reading the transcript while following along with Wallace's voice on a recording before you move on to the practice sessions on the next page.

Practice Session One

Reading

In our discussion of convention, we said that thinking of creativity as the evasion of conventions is a mistake, and that creativity is better thought of as a way of playing with conventions. In this practice session we want you to

ore how Wallace plays with, rather than evades, conventions. Listen to speech—ideally with a transcript in hand—and find at least five specific nples, other than the ones we've discussed above, of Wallace playing with ventions.

Then take at least 30 minutes to write about how his play with words, style, s, and the tradition of the commencement speech contributes to your erience as a reader. Note: At times you may not like Wallace's playfulness, eel free to write about the full range of ways his approach to convention tributes to your experience.

Practice Session Two

lecting

llace's commencement speech points out that it's conventional for lts to be governed by an inner monologue that ends up preventing m from thinking new thoughts. For this practice session we'd like you to aside three 15-minute periods over a span of several days during which consciously try to silence your automatic inner monologue and prac- being aware of your surroundings—the people around you, the scene olding before you, the questions or ideas you might normally tune out. er you've practiced awareness over the three 15-minute periods, spend east 30 minutes writing about what you saw, heard, or sensed that was v to you.

iting

llace says in his speech that, when we are no longer numb to our surround- s, we have the opportunity to make choices about the meaning of our erience. After reviewing your notes from the "Reflecting" practice ses- n, write a meditative essay that makes your experience of paying attention aningful. We invite you to play with conventions of thought and form as u write. We don't want you to imitate Wallace's voice—just his habits of nd.

EXPLORE

Throughout this book, we've identified many examples of writing that plays with convention, and below we offer a short reading list of inventive book-length contemporary works. Alison Bechdel uses the relatively new form graphic novel to tell an utterly nontraditional coming-of-age story. Junot Díaz's narrator blends English with untranslated Spanish and Dominican slang and mixes high and low cultural references to tell a new migration story. David Shields and Rebecca Solnit both experiment with nonfiction form: Shields explores the relationship of fiction and nonfiction in 618 numbered paragraphs and Solnit recreates the essay as a collage of analogies.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Díaz, Junot. *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao.* New York: Riverhead, 2007. Print.

Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto.* New York: Knopf, 2010. Print.

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Creativity at Work: James McBride's Serious Humor

When militant abolitionist John Brown and eighteen followers raided a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, their intention was to steal weapons and arm local slaves. Instead, Brown and his men were besieged by troops, and he was arrested, tried for treason, and hanged. He died unrepentant, insisting that he was right to fight the sin of slavery with violence. Although many echoed Robert E. Lee's dismissal of Brown as a "fanatic or madman," he became an international hero, praised by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even Victor Hugo for his courage and integrity. To this day, historians remain divided about whether Brown was insane, visionary, or America's first domestic terrorist.

Brown's story has been retold many times, but novelist and memoirist James McBride felt something vital about Brown was lost in the accounts that focus on whether Brown was a visionary or a madman, so he set out "to find a way to do him differently." How, McBride wondered, might Brown have appeared to a young slave—as a madman, a visionary leader, or both? To explore this question, McBride invented 12-year-old Kansas Territory slave Henry Shackleford and, at the beginning of *The Good Lord Bird,* has him become a fugitive slave after a violent confrontation between Brown and Shackleford's owner. Should Henry go with the unpredictable Brown, who has mistaken him for a girl and has nicknamed him "Onion," or should he return to the predictable insanity of slavery? Shackleford sticks with Brown and provides running commentary on Brown's Abolitionist efforts that is surprisingly, even shockingly, humorous.

Indeed, the unexpected homor in *The Good Lord Bird* prompted a *New York Times* reviewer to ask whether the novel shows that we have "come so far from historical horrors that we freely jest about them." McBride said in interviews that he did, in fact, want to write a novel that would allow people to laugh at things they had difficulty talking about—in particular, the history of slavery in the United States. This is one of humor's important cultural functions; we can recognize

historical injustices and other horrors through comedy, even when we can't yet face them directly. So when McBride tells Brown's familiar story in an irreverent way, the humor serves a deeper purpose: even as we laugh at Brown, an odd figure and the unlikeliest of heroes, we also come to understand that he was right to recognize slavery as an injustice that had to be abolished at any cost.