

February 15, 2014 -- Writing Strategies and Models: A Writing Workshop with Sheila Bender, Publisher of Writing it Real

I. Using Questions -- an ancestor my "speak" using unvoiced questions.

Here's a model:

How Could a Mother? By Bruce Holland Rogers (<http://www.shortshortshort.com/>)

It's better doing this woman to woman, don't you think? Before we get started, is there anything you need? Do you want something to drink? Coffee? A soft drink? Do you need to use the bathroom?

How had the day gone, before all this started? Were you at home the entire day, both you and your boyfriend? Had your boyfriend been drinking? Had you been drinking? How much did he drink during the day? In the evening? And you? How much did you have? Can you estimate? More than a six-pack? More than two six-packs? Was your daughter in the house with you the whole time?

When was it that your daughter—when was it that Josie started to cry? What was your state of mind when you punished her? What were you thinking when she wouldn't stop crying? Did your boyfriend say anything about Josie's crying? What did he say? What did you do to make her stop? Then, what did your boyfriend do? Did you do anything to restrain him? Did you say anything? No, I mean, did you say anything to your boyfriend about what he was doing to your daughter? Did you try to wake her up right away? Did you check her pulse? Did you listen for her breathing? When was the next time that you checked on her condition?

What time did you wake up? How soon after you woke up did you check on your daughter? You could tell right away? How did you know? Then what did you do? Was the abduction story his idea, or yours? Which car did you take? How did you come to choose Cascadia State Park? Had you been to the area before? When had he been there? Did he say anything to you about why he thought the park would be a good place? Where were you when you called the police to report her missing?

Is there anything you'd like to add?

Does this typescript accurately reflect what you have told me? Do you need more time to read it before you sign?

Can you guess how it feels for me, even with all the practice I have, to ask these questions? Do you wonder what questions I'm not able to ask you? Do you wonder if I have children of my own? Are you a monster? What is a monster? Did you know there were officers like me who handled only cases like this, one after another? Do you have any thoughts about the question no one can answer? Not the one everyone asks, but the one only a mother who has felt her own hands shake with a rage that is bigger than she is can ask? Not that I'd willingly trade the suffering on my side of the table for the suffering on your side, but why haven't I? Why not?

II. Using the Second Person: An ancestor might explain their life in the second person voice. A wonderful anthology is now available *You: An Anthology Devoted to the Second Person* Here is a model:

Girl by Jamaica Kincaid

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bare head in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a button-hole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra—far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles—you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man; and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

III. An ancestor might tell a short, short story. Here's a model:

What Happened During the Ice Storm by Jim Heynen:

One winter there was a freezing rain. How beautiful! people said when things outside started to shine with ice. But the freezing rain kept coming. Tree branches glistened like glass. Then broke like glass. Ice thickened on the windows until everything outside blurred. Farmers moved their livestock into the barns, and most animals were safe. But not the pheasants. Their eyes froze shut.

Some farmers went ice-skating down the gravel roads with clubs to harvest the pheasants that sat helplessly in the roadside ditches. The boys went out into the freezing rain to find pheasants too. They saw dark spots along a fence. Pheasants, all right. Five or six of them. The boys slid their feet along slowly, trying not to break the ice that covered the snow. They slid up close to the pheasants. The pheasants pulled their heads down between their wings. They couldn't tell how easy it was to see them huddled there.

The boys stood still in the icy rain. Their breath came out in slow puffs of steam. The pheasants' breath came out in quick little white puffs. Some of them lifted their heads and turned them from side to side, but they were blindfolded with ice and didn't flush. The boys had not brought clubs, or sacks, or anything but themselves. They stood over the pheasants, turning their own heads, looking at each other, each expecting the other to do something. To pounce on a pheasant, or to yell Bang! Things around them were shining and dripping with icy rain. The barbed-wire fence. The fence posts. The broken stems of grass. Even the grass seeds. The grass seeds looked like little yolks inside gelatin whites. And the pheasants looked like unborn birds glazed in egg white. Ice was hardening on the boys' caps and coats. Soon they would be covered with ice too.

Then one of the boys said, Shh. He was taking off his coat, the thin layer of ice splintering in flakes as he pulled his arms from the sleeves. But the inside of the coat was dry and warm. He covered two of the crouching pheasants with his coat, rounding the back of it over them like a shell. The other boys did the same. They covered all the helpless pheasants. The small gray hens and the larger brown cocks. Now the boys felt the rain soaking through their shirts and freezing. They ran across the slippery fields, unsure of their footing, the ice clinging to their skin as they made their way toward the blurry lights of the house.

("What Happened During the Ice Storm" by Jim Heynen from *You Know What Is Right*. Copyright © 1985)

IV. The Letter Form: An ancestor might write a letter to the family explaining their times and actions and many events. A descendent might write a letter to an ancestor.

Here's an excerpt from Obama's letter to his daughters' found here:

<http://parade.condenast.com/37592/parade/barack-obama-a-letter-to-my-daughters/>

Dear Malia and Sasha,

I know that you've both had a lot of fun these last two years on the campaign trail, going to picnics and parades and state fairs, eating all sorts of junk food your mother and I probably shouldn't have let you have. But I also know that it hasn't always been easy for you and Mom, and that as excited as you both are about that new puppy, it doesn't make up for all the time we've been apart. I know how much I've missed these past two years, and today I want to tell you a little more about why I decided to take our family on this journey.

When I was a young man, I thought life was all about me—about how I'd make my way in the world, become successful, and get the things I want. But then the two of you came into my world with all your curiosity and mischief and those smiles that never fail to fill my heart and light up my day. And suddenly, all my big plans for myself didn't seem so important anymore. I soon found that the greatest joy in my life was the joy I saw in yours. And I realized that my own life wouldn't count for much unless I was able to ensure that you had every opportunity for happiness and fulfillment in yours. In the end, girls, that's why I ran for President: because of what I want for you and for every child in this nation.

I want all our children to go to schools worthy of their potential—schools that challenge them, inspire them, and instill in them a sense of wonder about the world around them. I want them to have the chance to go to college—even if their parents aren't rich. And I want them to get good jobs: jobs that pay well and give them benefits like health care, jobs that let them spend time with their own kids and retire with dignity.

I want us to push the boundaries of discovery so that you'll live to see new technologies and inventions that improve our lives and make our planet cleaner and safer. And I want us to push our own human boundaries to reach beyond the divides of race and region, gender and religion that keep us from seeing the best in each other.

Sometimes we have to send our young men and women into war and other dangerous situations to protect our country—but when we do, I want to make sure that it is only for a very good reason, that we try our best to settle our differences with others peacefully, and that we do everything possible to keep our servicemen and women safe. And I want every child to understand that the blessings these brave Americans fight for are not free—that with the great privilege of being a citizen of this nation comes great responsibility.

That was the lesson your grandmother tried to teach me when I was your age, reading me the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence and telling me about the men and women who marched for equality because they believed those words put to paper two centuries ago should mean something.

She helped me understand that America is great not because it is perfect but because it can always be made better—and that the unfinished work of perfecting our union falls to each of us. It's a charge we pass on to our children, coming closer with each new generation to what we know America should be...

V. Always involve the five senses.

Here's a model and exercise for doing so:

In Writing, I Rush to Use My Senses by Sheila Bender

One of my favorite exercises is to look out my window and write five sentences, one for each of the senses. For instance, if I look out my studio window now, on a day when the sun is shining after days of rain, I write:

Today bunches of Shasta daisy leaves cluster inside a ring of orange calendula blossoms. When I open the door of my study, I hear the honking of the Canadian Geese gathered on the beach I cannot see from here. I remember the friend who I shared poems with, who gave me Welsh poppy seeds because the plants grow in shade and there is much of that on the path to my study. I want to talk to her, though she has been dead now five years. I want to tell her that the poppies are now lush, that in her memory I cannot thin them, must feel them as I brush past. Then the memory of the friend who said she could smell the dust in my house and asked if I could smell it, too. Now I walk the path to my house to warm up yellow soup, let the Indian curry spices fill my empty mouth.

If I give this a title, say, “At the End of May,” because that is when I am writing this, I think I might have written a prose poem or sudden nonfiction. I think the beauty and the sadness of losing a treasured friend, the flirting with thinking about my mortality in the dust image and the speechlessness we feel when we consider the mystery of death all resonate again the fact that I am writing this at a particular time of year, when so much is blooming and coming to life. But it is the end of May and that word “end” honors the transmigratory (oh, those geese!) nature of our lives.

Really, I sat down to write five sentences, one each for each of the five senses. I found I needed a few more (eight in all) to express what I needed to about my deceased friend and the dust that reminds me everything is transitory.

I let myself break the rules of my assignment, remaining conscious, however, that I hadn’t put taste in the piece yet. When I knew I couldn’t close without the sense of taste, I found that the path I’d described was useful for getting to the taste. I found too that where I would put the soup, into my mouth, felt more correct with the modifier “empty.” It just seemed to go with missing my friend here amidst the glory of the garden and the day.

So here it is again, presented with a title and looking whole, of a piece:

At the End of May

Today bunches of Shasta daisy leaves cluster inside a ring of orange calendula blossoms. When I open the door of my study, I hear the honking of the Canadian Geese gathered on the beach I cannot see from here. I remember the friend who I shared poems with, who gave me Welsh poppy seeds because the plants grow in shade and there is much of that on the path to my study. I want to talk to her, though she has been dead now five years. I want to tell her that the poppies are now lush, that in her memory I cannot thin them, must feel them as I brush past. Then the memory of the friend who said she could smell the dust in my house and asked if I could smell it, too. Now I walk the path to my house to warm up yellow soup, let the Indian curry spices fill my empty mouth.