Part | |

CLARIFYING IDEAS

Description





"By George, you're right! I thought there was something familiar about it."

When you describe a person, place, thing, experience, or phenomenon, you want your readers to understand it as you do and to experience its sounds, tastes, smells, or textures, both physical and emotional. You want to put your reader there—where you are, where your subject is—and enable them to see it through your eyes, interpret it through your understanding. Because you can't include everything, the details you select, the information you impart, will determine your emphasis, so pick the information that matters most to your point of view. You may decide to focus on only the big picture, the outline, the bare essentials, as seen from a distance as in the cartoon map of the United States that opens this chapter (235). Or you may choose a close-up, concentrating on the small, revealing details.

Your description can *exist for its own sake*, though in fact, few do. Most descriptions, however, function in more than one way, for more than one purpose. A description, perhaps accompanied by a photograph or diagram, can exist *to show*—no surprise—*what something looks like or how it works*. Thus Linda Villarosa's "How Much of the Body Is Replaceable?" (246–47) simply presents the evidence to demonstrate that "from the top of the head to the tips of the toes, nearly every part of the body can be replaced. . . ." The accompanying diagram identifies the nature of the many replacement options—hair, brain, eyes, skin, heart, blood vessels, joints—with captions that explain the nature of the replacement and some of the research in progress. Issues of medical ethics, longevity, cost and allocation of medical time and resources, rationing, theology, and psychology—all of which would involve interpretation and might affect whether the replacements would actually be used—are off the table in this presentation.

Or a description can serve as an argument, with or without words. For instance, compare Villarosa's diagram with another diagram of the human body, Istvan Banyai's "Inflation" (264). With only dates—1929–2050—and prices from 3¢ to 1,000,000¢, Banyai's line drawings of the expanding body make his case.

A description can entertain. Another commentary on people's bodies, Suzanne Britt's "That Lean and Hungry Look" (261–63) concentrates on the temperaments, pastimes, and lifestyles of fat and thin people, rather than on the specifics of their bodies. Her generalizations—"Thin people believe in logic. Fat people see all sides. The sides fat people see are rounded blobs"—are intended to provide a humorous defense of the "convivial" fat, in comparison with the "oppressive" thin, whom readers will identify as general characters and personality types, rather than as specific individuals.

Other descriptions tell stories, of people or places, re-creating the emotional sense of a person, place, or experience. Sometimes the author writes to understand the subject for herself, as does Meredith Hall in "Killing Chickens" (242–45), focusing on the events that lead to the breakup of her marriage. Scott Russell Sanders's "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze" (249–59) analyzes his alcoholic father's influence

on the family, partly to understand it for himself but partly to convey this understanding to an audience of alcoholics and their families. In both of these highly detailed, specific stories, the precise information the authors provide enables readers to understand the emotional and psychological events in terms of their own experiences and the people they know. Even if we haven't met Hall's adulterous soon-to-be-ex-husband or Sanders's father and would not recognize them in person, we know what they're like. We can recognize the fathers' powerful personalities even when they're not at home, sense their wives' distress, the children's uneasiness and fear. Although Hall's personal story might not prevent others' divorces, Sanders's account is intended as a cautionary tale as well, and thus becomes an argument not only against drinking, but a form of advocacy for the families of alcoholics who must contend with substance abuse.

Other descriptions are inviting, welcoming. Mark Twain serves up nostalgia as he invites readers to visit "Uncle John's Farm" (265–71), in a section of his *Autobiography* with its appeal to the senses, for an abundance of sensory details are often the mainstay of description. Thus Twain evokes *sound* ("I know the crackling sound [a ripe watermelon] makes when the carving knife enters its end"); *smell* ("I can call back . . . [from] the deep woods, the earthy smells"); *touch* ("I can feel the thumping rain, upon my head, of hickory nuts and walnuts"); *taste* ("I know the taste of the watermelon which has been honestly come by, and I know the taste of the watermelon which has been acquired by art"); and *sight* ("I can see the white and black children grouped on the hearth, with the firelight playing on their faces and the shadows flickering upon the walls"). Twain calls on all our senses to take us to his beloved farm—and to love it as he does.

Indeed, most descriptions of places, like descriptions of people, phenomena, processes, and other subjects, are strongly influenced by the observer's aims, experiences, and values. Thus in much nontechnical writing the descriptions you provide are bound to be subjective, intended both to guide and influence your readers to see the topic your way rather than theirs. As a writer you can't afford to leave critical spaces blank; you must provide direction to influence your readers' interpretations, as you would need to do when looking at the cartoon on page 235. Although we have heard, to the point of cliché, that one picture is worth a thousand words, very often pictures need some words to expand and focus the interpretation to which the picture invites us. This is true not only of the cartoon on page 235, for which we could come up with a variety of captions, and the photo of binge drinking on page 255, but also of Linda Villarosa's schematic diagram of replaceable parts of the body (246–47). Although the diagram shows us what parts are replaceable, we need written explanations to flesh out the figure.

Linda Hogan's "Dwellings" (273–76) reflects on a variety of places to live from a range of perspectives—close up to long distance, immediate

to remote in time, personal to anecdotal and legendary. This combination of points of view is common in description, just as it is in photography, where the interpreter employs a variety of angles and focuses to convey her personal vision. (In fact, the style of a distinctive photographer—Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, Cindy Sherman—is as individual and as immediately recognizable as a writer's characteristic literary style.) In her writing Hogan is always concerned with "the deepest questions, those of spirit, of shelter, of growth and movement toward peace and liberation, inner and outer," and it is these qualities she seeks in the environment, natural and manmade. As she explores the possibilities of ideal dwellings, Hogan looks first from long distance at "a broken wall of earth that contains old roots and pebbles woven together and exposed." Close up, however, this "rise of raw earth" becomes a bees' cliff dwelling, Anasazi-like, a sheltering hill of "tunneling rooms" that becomes a catacomb as the bees die. Inspired by this "intelligent architecture of memory," Hogan describes her own "dreams of peace," escaping to a wilderness sanctuary, a "nest inside stone or woods," "where a human hand has not been in everything." As she meditates on the goodness of fit between various shelters and their occupants—caves, fanciful bird houses, barn swallows' cluster nesting— Hogan discovers a great horned owl's nest adorned with a blue thread from one of Hogan's skirts and a "gnarl" of her daughter's hair. These specific details, primarily visual, lead her to contemplate the shelter that all living things find in the integrated universe, throbbing with life and possibility. Although Hogan's description throughout concentrates on precise physical details, the literal serves as a metaphor for the world beyond this world, and its effect is intensely spiritual: "The whole world was a nest . . . in the maze of the universe, holding us."

Poignant events can occur anywhere, in places as familiar as one's own backyard or in exotic spots halfway around the world. As intense as the message of Hogan's "Dwellings," but with complicated political undercurrents is Asiya S. Tschannerl's "One Remembers Most What One Loves" (278–81). Here she recalls incidents from her early childhood in Beijing to depict her life as a foreign schoolchild, "a little black [American] kid" who soon learned to speak "perfect Mandarin." She juxtaposes these with images of Tiananmen Square, initially a place of happy socialization, later tainted with the bloody massacre of the Chinese people by Chinese soldiers. Having become acculturated to life in China, she undergoes culture shock on return to her native country, with its noise, racism, and lack of respect for elders.

Rarely do any literary techniques occur in isolation. Although the chapters in *The Essay Connection* are intended to highlight many of the major techniques of nonfiction writing, it is rare to find relatively pure types. Hogan's "Dwellings," for instance, may be interpreted as an implied argument in favor of preserving a vulnerable, perhaps vanishing, ecosystem.

Essays that blend different techniques are far more common, as you may already have experienced if you've tried to write a narrative or, for example, an explanation, of cause and effect.

Scott Russell Sanders's description of his father in "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze" (249-59) presents an argument—and an explanation—and uses comparison and contrast to illustrate cause-and-effect. Sanders uses the single example of his father's alcoholism and its numerous, devastating effects on his family to serve as a description of alcoholism in general: the secret drinking, the reckless driving, the weaving walk, his mother's accusations and his father's rage, the children cowering in fear—at the fights, the sneakiness, the unseemly behavior. Sanders's reaction to his father's drinking, as both a child and as an adult, may also be generalized to describe the impact of parental drinking on the children of alcoholics: "I lie there [in bed] hating him, loving him, fearing him, knowing I have failed him. I tell myself he drinks to ease the ache . . . I must have caused by disappointing him somehow, a murderous ache I should be able to relieve by doing all my chores, earning A's in school. . . . He would not . . . drink himself to death, if only I were perfect." The accompanying photograph of a bartender in Cancun (255) pouring tequila down the willing throat of an American college student engaging in a spring break ritual, implies an argument that corroborates Sanders's view of alcohol abuse, even if the participants in the ritual would disagree with this interpretation. Sanders's account of alcoholism is personal and biographical, not medical. As these authors and illustrators show us, there is a world of difference in descriptions, a compelling, complex world to explore. Whether we want the pictures wide-angled or narrow, distant or close up, sharply focused or fuzzy, is up to us—and our readers.

STRATEGIES FOR WRITING—DESCRIPTION

- 1. What is my main purpose in writing this descriptive essay? To present and interpret factual information about the subject? To recreate its essence as I have experienced it, or the person, as I have known him or her? To form the basis for a story, a cause-and-effect sequence, or an argument—overt or implied? What mixture of objective information and subjective impressions will best fit my purpose?
- 2. If my audience is completely unfamiliar with the subject, how much and what kinds of basic information will I have to provide so they can understand what I'm talking about? (Can I assume that they've seen lakes, but not necessarily Lake Tahoe, the subject of my paper? Or that they know other grandmothers, but not mine, about whom I'm writing?) If my readers are familiar with the subject, in what ways can I describe it so they'll discover new aspects of it?

- 3. What particular characteristics of my subject do I wish to emphasize? Will I use in this description details revealed by the senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch? Any other sort of information, such as a person's characteristic behavior, gestures, ways of speaking or moving or dressing, values, companions, possessions, occupation, residence, style of spending money, beliefs, hopes, vulnerabilities? Nonsensory details will be particularly necessary in describing an abstraction, such as somebody's temperament or state of mind.
- 4. How will I organize my description? From the most dominant to the least dominant details? From the most to the least familiar aspects (or vice versa)? According to what an observer is likely to notice first, second . . . last? Or according to some other pattern?
- 5. Will I use much general language, or will my description be highly specific throughout? Do I want to evoke a clear, distinct image of the subject? Or a mood—nostalgic, thoughtful, happy, sad, or otherwise?

MEREDITH HALL

Hall was born in 1949 and grew up in New Hampshire. She quit college at eighteen and returned only after "forced to" by divorce as the only full-time nontraditional student at Bowdoin College. This experience ("my great intellectual hungers were fed"), enhanced by a full scholarship, changed her life and launched her career as a teacher and writer. Graduating at age forty-four, she earned an MA in writing from the University of New Hampshire (1995) and has taught there ever since. Her prize-winning essays have been published in *Creative Nonfiction* and the *New York Times*. In 2005, she received the Gift of Freedom Award, a two-year writing grant from A Room of Her Own Foundation. She lives on the coast of Maine.

About writing "Killing Chickens"—her first published work—and another intensely personal essay, "Shunned," she says, "I suspect that each of us has obsessive images about difficulties in our lives. They get hazy in our memory of happiness [but] are jarring to us because we're not yet at peace with them. Writing is a way, in part, to come to terms with them. These are stories I have not told friends; these are not stories I talk about, and so there's an instinct to finally share these with strangers." She adds, "I tell my students that you don't have to write anything. . . . But when you do, you must be frighteningly honest with your reader. If you're not willing to expose yourself completely and risk everything in that honesty, then . . . go write about something else. I don't care about writing that doesn't commit a writer fully." Of "Killing Chickens" itself, Hall says, "The image of the soft, dusty light in the chicken coop and my little hens laid out one by one has come to embody for me the difficulties of our family breakup. Love and violence tangle in this essay. My children were unaware of what I was doing outside, of my first desperate efforts to take charge of my new life. Inside the house, they had already started their own young reckoning. That it was such a beautiful spring day, so full of promise, and my birthday, plays in my memory against the finality and trauma of the deaths and the impending divorce."

As you read this piece of creative nonfiction—a true story and so-labeled—compare this with the fictional short stories you have read—or Tallent's "No One's a Mystery" (388–90). What, if any, aspects of "Killing Chickens" itself—events, characters, dialogue, setting, details of everyday life—tell you this is a true story rather than a work of fiction? Or does your understanding that this is a true story arise from the fact that the author identifies it as truth rather than fiction? Suppose Hall had called it "fiction." Would you have read it any differently?

Killing Chickens

tucked her wings tight against her heaving body, crouched over her, and covered her flailing head with my gloved hand. Holding her neck hard against the floor of the coop, I took a breath, set something deep and hard inside my heart, and twisted her head. I heard her neck break with a crackle. Still she fought me, struggling to be free of my weight, my gloved hands, my need to kill her. Her shiny black beak opened and closed, opened and closely silently, as she gasped for air. I didn't know this would happen. I was undone by the flapping, the dust rising and choking me, the disbelieving little eye turned up to mine. I held her beak closed, covering that eye. Still she pushed, her reptile legs bracing against mine, her warmth, her heart beating fast with mine. I turned her head on her floppy neck again, and again, corkscrewing her breathing tube, struggling to end the gasping. The eye, turned around and around, blinked and studied me. The early spring sun flowed onto us through a silver stream of dust, like a stage light, while we fought each other. I lifted my head and saw that the other birds were eating still, pecking their way around us for stray bits of corn. This one, this twisted and broken lump of gleaming black feathers, clawed hard at the floor, like a big stretch, and then deflated like a pierced ball. I waited, holding her tiny beak and broken neck with all my might.

I was killing chickens. It was my 38th birthday. My best friend, Ashley, had chosen that morning to tell me that my husband had slept with her a year before. I had absorbed the rumors and suspicions about other women for 10 years, but this one, I knew, was going to break us. When I roared upstairs and confronted John, he told me to go fuck myself, ran downstairs and jumped into the truck. Our sons, Sam and Ben, were making a surprise for me at the table; they stood behind me silently in the kitchen door while John gunned the truck out of the yard. "It's okay, guys," I said. "Mum and Dad just had a fight. You better go finish my surprise before I come peeking."

I carried Bertie's warm, limp body outside and laid her on the grass. Back inside the coop, I stalked my hens and came up with Tippy-Toes. I gathered her frantic wings and crouched over her. John was supposed to kill off our beautiful but tired old hens, no longer laying, last month to make way for the new chicks that were arriving tomorrow. But he was never around, and the job had not been done. I didn't know how to do this. But I was going to do it myself. This was just a little thing in all the things I was going to have to learn to do alone.

I had five more to go. Tippy-Toes tried to shriek behind my glove. I clamped my hand over her beak and gave her head a hard twist. I felt her body break deep inside my own chest.

Two down. I felt powerful, capable. I could handle whatever came to me.

12

13

But I needed a rest. I was tired, exhausted, with a heavy, muffled weight settling inside. "I'm coming in," I called in a false, singsong voice from the kitchen door. "Better hide my surprise." Ten and 7, the boys knew something was up, something bigger than the moody, dark days John brought home, bigger than the hushed, hissing fights we had behind our bedroom door, bigger than the days-long silent treatment John imposed on me if I asked too many questions about where he had been and why. Sam and Ben were working quietly in the kitchen, not giggling and jostling the way they usually did. Their downy blond heads touched as they leaned over their projects. I felt a crush of sadness, of defeat. We were exploding into smithereens on this pretty March day, and we all knew it.

"I have to make a cake!" I sang from the doorway. "When are you 7 guys going to be done in there?"

"Wait! Wait!" they squealed. It was an empty protest, their cheer as 8 hollow as mine.

Our old house smelled good, of wood and the pancakes the three of us had eaten this morning, in that other world of hope and tight determination before Ashley's phone call. We lived on a ridge high over the mouth of the Damariscotta River on the coast of Maine. From our beds, we could all see out over Pemaquid Point, over Monhegan Island, over the ocean to the edge of the Old World. The rising sun burst into our sleep each morning. At night, before bed, we lay on my bed together—three of us—naming Orion and Leo and the Pleiades in whispers. Monhegan's distant light swept the walls of our rooms all night at 36-second intervals. Our little house creaked in the wind during February storms. Now spring had come, and the world had shifted.

"Help me make my cake," I said to the boys. They dragged their 1 chairs to the counter.

"Mum, will Dad be home for your birthday tonight?" Sam asked. Both boys were so contained, so taut, so helpless. They leaned against me, quiet.

Guilt and fear tugged me like an undertow. I started to cry. "I don't know, my loves. I think this is a really big one."

Bertie and Tippy-Toes lay side by side on the brown grass, their eyes open, necks bent. I closed the coop door behind me and lunged for the next hen.

"It's all right," I said softly. "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right. Shhh, Silly, shh." I crouched over her. Silly was the boys' favorite because she let them carry her around the yard. I hoped they would forget her when the box of peeping balls of fluff arrived tomorrow.

"It's okay, Silly," I said quietly, wrapping my gloved fingers around her hard little head. She was panting, her eyes wild, frantic, betrayed. I covered them with my fingers and twisted her neck hard. Her black wings,

17

19

20

21

22

25

26

27

28

30

iridescent in the dusty sunlight, beat against my legs. I held her close to me while she scrabbled against my strong hands. I started to cry again.

When I went back up to the house, Bertie and Tippy-Toes and Silly and Mother Mabel lay on the grass outside the coop.

Benjamin came into the kitchen and leaned against my legs. "What are we going to do?" he asked.

"About what, Sweetheart?" I hoped he was not asking me about tomorrow. Or the next day.

"Nothing," he said, drifting off to play with Sam upstairs.

We frosted the cake blue, Ben's favorite color, and put it on the table next to their presents for me, wrapped in wallpaper. I wanted to call someone, to call my mother or my sister. Yesterday I would have called Ashley, my best friend, who had listened to me cry and rail about John again and again. Instead, I brought in three loads of wood and put them in the box John had left empty.

"Sam, will you lay up a fire for tonight? And Ben, go down to the cellar and get a bunch of kindling wood."

Like serious little men, my children did what I asked.

"What are we going to make for my birthday supper?"

"I thought we were going to Uncle Stephen's and Aunt Ashley's," Sam said.

"Know what?" I said. "Know what I want to do? Let's just stay here and have our own private little party. Just us."

I felt marooned with my children. I sat at the table, watching while they did their chores, then headed back out to finish mine.

Minnie Hen was next. She let me catch her and kill her without much fight. I laid her next to the others in the cold grass.

Itty-Bit was last. She was my favorite. The others had chewed off her toes, one by one, when she was a chick. I had made a separate box for her, a separate feeder, separate roost, and smeared antibiotic ointment four times a day on the weeping stubs. She survived, and ate from my hand after that. She had grown to be fierce with the other hens, never letting them too close to her, able to slip in, grab the best morsels and flee before they could peck her. I had come to admire her very much, my tough little biddie.

She cowered in the corner, alone. I sat next to her, and she let me pull her up into my lap. I stroked her feathers smooth, stroke after stroke. Her comb was pale and shriveled, a sign of her age. I knew she hadn't laid an egg for months. She was shaking. I held her warmth against me, cooing to her, "It's all right, Itty-Bit. Everything's going to be all right. Don't be scared." My anger at John centered like a tornado on having to kill this hen. "You stupid, selfish son of a bitch," I said. I got up, crying again,

holding Itty-Bit tight to me. I laid her gently on the floor and crouched over her. The sun filled the coop with thick light.

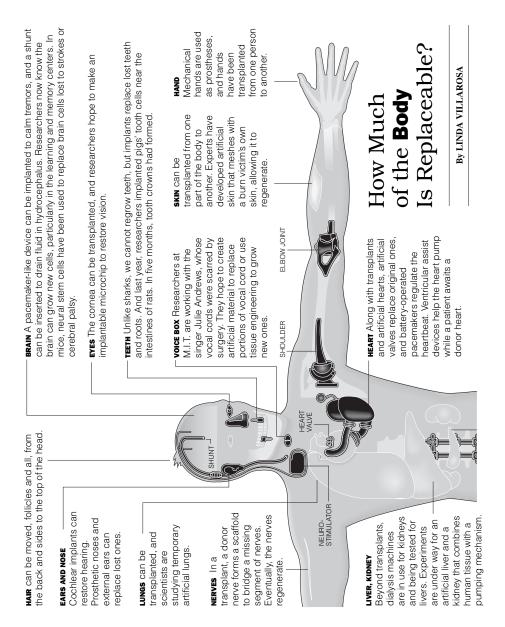
That night, after eating spaghetti and making a wish and blowing out 38 candles and opening presents made by Sam and Benjamin—a mail holder made from wood slats, a sculpture of 2-by-4s and shells; after baths and reading stories in bed and our sweet, in-the-dark, whispered good nights; after saying "I don't know what is going to happen" to my scared children; after banking the fire and turning off the lights, I sat on the porch in the cold, trying to imagine what had to happen next. I could see the outline of the coop against the dark, milky sky. I touched my fingers, my hands, so familiar to me. Tonight they felt like someone else's. I wrapped my arms around myself—thin, tired—and wished it were yesterday.

Tomorrow morning, I thought, I have to turn over the garden and go to the dump. Tomorrow morning, I have to call a lawyer. I have to figure out what to say to Sam and Benjamin. I have to put Ben's sculpture on the mantel and put some mail in Sam's holder on the desk. I have to clean out the coop and spread fresh shavings.

LINDA VILLAROSA

Linda Villarosa (born 1959) is a graduate of the University of Colorado and a former executive editor of *Essence Magazine*. She currently works as a freelance journalist based in New York City and has edited or coedited several books on parenting, adolescence, and health.

How Much of the Body Is Replaceable?



Copyright © 2003 by The *New York Times Company*. Reprinted with permission. *Sources:* Dr. Robert Langer, M.I.T.; Dr. Denise Faustman, Harvard Medical School; Dr. Alan J. Russell, University of Pittsburgh School of Engineering; Dr. James Herndon, Harvard Medical School; Dr. Todd Kuiken, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

sugar, calculates how much pancreas, newly approved regenerate cells pump to send out the the pancreas to that produce right dose. In mice, diabetic patients' blood insulin they need, and signals an implanted diabetes leads responsible for by the F.D.A.. checks killing the cells PANCREAS An artificial insulin. Implants can GENITALS BLOOD VESSELS of synthetic with human sometimes tissue, can combined material, replace arteries veins. and

Vaginas are rebuilt, generally that have been removed for cancer patients. replace testicles

Researchers

hope to try the same experiments

in humans.

plastic; after about two months, what's left replace broken or shattered ones. Now, Bones Metal rods or natural grafts car artificial bones are being made of

hat fuses with bone cells. 13-year-old British girl LEGS Last summer, a

absorbed into the body. Researchers are experimenting with polymer scaffolding

of natural bone tissue bonds with the

artificial material, which is eventually

ceramics. Toes are shoulder joints can JOINTS Knee, finger, metals, plastics or ransplanted from be replaced with nip, elbow and sometimes the first recipient of a with cancer became 'bionic leg," a bone implant that mimics natural growth with the help of an

the feet to replace

electromagnetic

ost fingers.

These tissues can be grown in a lab, using tissue, then injected MUSCLES, LIGAMENTS back into the body. transplanted from person to person. Cartilage can be the patient's own

Legend has it that in the fifth century A.D. a beautiful woman kissed the hand of Pope Leo I during Mass. The pope, mortified at feeling desire for the woman, ordered a

restored the limb by performing servant to cut off the offending hand. The Virgin Mary later

areas — from building better medical devices body can be replaced by transplanting organs progressing at a pace only Steve Austin, the commonplace. From the top of the head to the tips of the toes, nearly every part of the or damaged tissue. And research in several an act immortalized in stained glass at the and tissues from one person to the next or the Miracle of the Severed Hand Many centuries later, replacing a body substituting artificial parts for weakened new ones with the help of stem cells - is part is no longer miraculous, but simply to creating artificial organs to growing Church of Orsanmichele in Florence. Six Million Dollar Man, could match.

said Dr. Robert Langer, professor of chemical and biomedical engineering at M.I.T. and a that someone somewhere isn't working on, every part will be replaceable, even if that "How much of the body is replaceable? I have not come across a part of the body day is centuries away."

CARTILAGE, TENDONS

Questions for discussion and writing

- 1. Villarosa refers to "the Six Million Dollar Man," from a television show about an action hero, who, after having been severely injured, was "put back together"—better than new—using artificial parts. *The Bionic Woman* took up a similar theme. What other shows or movies use this idea, and why is it a popular subject? If you have read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, discuss to what extent it belongs to this tradition.
- 2. Many people currently alter their body voluntarily through plastic surgery. Do you suppose that at some time in the future people will elect to replace healthy body parts with stronger, more durable artificial ones? Explore the ethical implications of this possibility. For example, if professional athletes could buy themselves better knees, arms, or legs, what would the implications of this trend be for professional sports? What about students who might want to implant computing devices into their brain to enhance math ability? (See Bill McKibben, "Designer Genes," 413–23 for an extension of this discussion.)



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

"Under the Influence," from Secrets of the Universe (1991), is full of examples that describe the effects of alcoholism—on the alcoholic father, on his wife, alternately distressed and defiant, and on his children, cowering with guilt and fear. Sanders uses especially the example of himself, the eldest son, who felt responsible for his father's drinking, guilty because he couldn't get him to stop, and obligated to atone for his father's sins through his own perfection and accomplishment. Although at the age of forty-four Sanders knows that his father was "consumed by disease rather than by disappointment," he writes to understand "the corrosive mixture of help-lessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as the son of an alcoholic." Through the specific example of his family's behavior, Sanders illustrates the general problem of alcoholism that afflicts some "ten or fifteen million people." He expects his readers to generalize and to learn from his understanding.

Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze

y father drank. He drank as a gut-punched boxer gasps for breath, as a starving dog gobbles food—compulsively, secretly, in pain and trembling. I use the past tense not because he ever quit drinking but because he quit living. That is how the story ends for my father, age sixty-four, heart bursting, body cooling, slumped and forsaken on the linoleum of my brother's trailer. The story continues for my brother, my sister, my mother, and me, and will continue as long as memory holds.

In the perennial present of memory, I slip into the garage or barn to see my father tipping back the flat green bottles of wine, the brown cylinders of whiskey, the cans of beer disguised in paper bags. His Adam's apple bobs, the liquid gurgles, he wipes the sandy-haired back of a hand over his lips, and then, his bloodshot gaze bumping into me, he stashes the bottle or can inside his jacket, under the workbench, between two bales of hay, and we both pretend the moment has not occurred.

"What's up, buddy?" he says, thick-tongued and edgy.

"Sky's up," I answer, playing along.

"And don't forget prices," he grumbles. "Prices are always up. And taxes."

In memory, his white 1951 Pontiac with the stripes down the hood and the Indian head on the snout lurches to a stop in the driveway; or it is the 1956 Ford station wagon, or the 1963 Rambler shaped like a toad, or the sleek 1969 Bonneville that will do 120 miles per hour on straightaways; or it is the robin's-egg-blue pickup, new in 1980, battered in 1981, the year of his death. He climbs out, grinning dangerously, unsteady on his legs, and we children interrupt our game of catch, our building of snow forts, our picking of plums, to watch in silence as he weaves past us into the house, where he drops into his overstuffed chair and falls asleep. Shaking her head, our mother stubs out a cigarette he has left smoldering in the ashtray. All evening, until our bedtimes, we tiptoe past him, as past a snoring dragon. Then we curl fearfully in our sheets, listening. Eventually he wakes with a grunt, Mother slings accusations at him, he snarls back, she yells, he growls, their voices clashing. Before long, she retreats to their bedroom, sobbing—not from the blows of fists, for he never strikes her, but from the force of his words.

Left alone, our father prowls the house, thumping into furniture, rummaging in the kitchen, slamming doors, turning the pages of the newspaper with a savage crackle, muttering back at the late-night drivel from television. The roof might fly off, the walls might buckle from the pressure of his rage. Whatever my brother and sister and mother may be thinking on their own rumpled pillows, I lie there hating him, loving

him, fearing him, knowing I have failed him. I tell myself he drinks to ease the ache that gnaws at his belly, an ache I must have caused by disappointing him somehow, a murderous ache I should be able to relieve by doing all my chores, earning A's in school, winning baseball games, fixing the broken washer and the burst pipes, bringing in the money to fill his empty wallet. He would not hide the green bottles in his toolbox, would not sneak off to the barn with a lump under his coat, would not fall asleep in the daylight, would not roar and fume, would not drink himself to death, if only I were perfect.

I am forty-four, and I know full well now that my father was an alcoholic, a man consumed by disease rather than by disappointment. What had seemed to me a private grief is in fact, of course, a public scourge. In the United States alone, some ten or fifteen million people share his ailment, and behind the doors they slam in fury or disgrace, countless other children tremble. I comfort myself with such knowledge, holding it against the throb of memory like an ice pack against a bruise. Other people have keener sources of grief: poverty, racism, rape, war. I do not wish to compete to determine who has suffered most. I am only trying to understand the corrosive mixture of helplessness, responsibility, and shame that I learned to feel as the son of an alcoholic. I realize now that I did not cause my father's illness, nor could I have cured it. Yet for all this grownup knowledge, I am still ten years old, my own son's age, and as that boy I struggle in guilt and confusion to save my father from pain.

Consider a few of our synonyms for *drunk*: tipsy, tight, pickled, soused, and plowed; stoned and stewed, lubricated and inebriated, juiced and sluiced; three sheets to the wind, in your cups, out of your mind, under the table; lit up, tanked up, wiped out; besotted, blotto, bombed, and buzzed; plastered, polluted, putrefied; loaded or looped, boozy, woozy, fuddled, or smashed; crocked and shit-faced, corked and pissed, snockered and sloshed.

It is a mostly humorous lexicon, as the lore that deals with drunks—in jokes and cartoons, in plays, films and television skits—is largely comic. Aunt Matilda nips elderberry wine from the sideboard and burps politely during supper. Uncle Fred slouches to the table glassy-eyed, wearing a lampshade for a hat and murmuring, "Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker." Inspired by cocktails, Mrs. Somebody recounts the events of her day in a fuzzy dialect, while Mr. Somebody nibbles her ear and croons a bawdy song. On the sofa with Boyfriend, Daughter Somebody giggles, licking gin from her lips, and loosens the bows in her hair. Junior knocks back some brews with his chums at the Leopard Lounge and stumbles home to the wrong house, wonders foggily why he cannot locate his pajamas, and crawls naked into bed with the ugliest girl in school. The family dog slurps from a neglected martini and wobbles to the nursery, where he vomits in Baby's shoe.

It is all great fun. But if in the audience you notice a few laughing faces turn grim when the drunk lurches onstage, don't be surprised, for these are the children of alcoholics. Over the grinning mask of Dionysus, the leering face of Bacchus, these children cannot help seeing the bloated features of their own parents. Instead of laughing, they wince, they mourn. Instead of celebrating the drunk as one freed from constraints, they pity him as one enslaved. They refuse to believe *in vino veritas*, having seen their befuddled parents skid away from truth toward folly and oblivion. And so these children bite their lips until the lush staggers into the wings.

My father, when drunk, was neither funny nor honest; he was pathetic, frightening, deceitful. There seemed to be a leak in him somewhere, and he poured in booze to keep from draining dry. Like a torture victim who refuses to squeal, he would never admit that he had touched a drop, not even in his last year, when he seemed to be dissolving in alcohol before our very eyes. I never knew him to lie about anything, ever, except about this one ruinous fact. Drowsy, clumsy, unable to fix a bicycle tire, balance a grocery sack, or walk across a room, he was stripped of his true self by drink. In a matter of minutes, the contents of a bottle could transform a brave man into a coward, a buddy into a bully, a gifted athlete and skilled carpenter and shrewd businessman into a bumbler. No dictionary of synonyms for *drunk* would soften the anguish of watching our prince turn into a frog.

Father's drinking became the family secret. While growing up, we children never breathed a word of it beyond the four walls of our house. To this day, my brother and sister rarely mention it, and then only when I press them. I did not confess the ugly, bewildering fact to my wife until his wavering and slurred speech forced me to. Recently, on the seventh anniversary of my father's death, I asked my mother if she ever spoke of his drinking to friends. "No, no, never," she replied hastily. "I couldn't bear for anyone to know."

The secret bores under the skin, gets in the blood, into the bone, and stays there. Long after you have supposedly been cured of malaria, the fever can flare up, the tremors can shake you. So it is with the fevers of shame. You swallow the bitter quinine of knowledge, and you learn to feel pity and compassion toward the drinker. Yet the shame lingers and, because of it, anger.

For a long stretch of my childhood we lived on a military reservation in Ohio, an arsenal where bombs were stored underground in bunkers and vintage airplanes burst into flames and unstable artillery shells boomed nightly at the dump. We had the feeling, as children, that we played within a minefield, where a heedless footfall could trigger an explosion. When Father was drinking, the house, too, became a minefield. The least bump could set off either parent.

The more he drank, the more obsessed Mother became with stopping him. She hunted for bottles, counted the cash in his wallet, sniffed at his

17

21

22

23

24

breath. Without meaning to snoop, we children blundered left and right into damning evidence. On afternoons when he came home from work sober, we flung ourselves at him for hugs and felt against our ribs the tell-tale lump in his coat. In the barn we tumbled on the hay and heard beneath our sneakers the crunch of broken glass. We tugged open a drawer in his workbench, looking for screwdrivers or crescent wrenches, and spied a gleaming six-pack among the tools. Playing tag, we darted around the house just in time to see him sway on the rear stoop and heave a finished bottle into the woods. In his good-night kiss we smelled the cloying sweetness of Clorets, the mints he chewed to camouflage his dragon's breath.

I can summon up that kiss right now by recalling Theodore Roethke's lines about his own father:

The whiskey on your breath Could make a small boy dizzy; But I hung on like death: Such waltzing was not easy.

Such waltzing was hard, terribly hard, for with a boy's scrawny arms I was trying to hold my tipsy father upright.

For years, the chief source of those incriminating bottles and cans was a grimy store a mile from us, a cinderblock place called Sly's, with two gas pumps outside and a mangy dog asleep in the window. Inside, on rusty metal shelves or in wheezing coolers, you could find pop and Popsicles, cigarettes, potato chips, canned soup, raunchy postcards, fishing gear, Twinkies, wine, and beer. When Father drove anywhere on errands, Mother would send us along as guards, warning us not to let him out of our sight. And so with one or more of us on board, Father would cruise up to Sly's, pump a dollar's worth of gas or plump the tires with air, and then, telling us to wait in the car, he would head for the doorway.

Dutiful and panicky, we cried, "Let us go with you!" "No," he answered. "I'll be back in two shakes." "Please!"

"No!" he roared. "Don't you budge or I'll jerk a knot in your tails!" So we stayed put, kicking the seats, while he ducked inside. Often, when he had parked the car at a careless angle, we gazed in through the window and saw Mr. Sly fetching down from the shelf behind the cash register two green pints of Gallo wine. Father swigged one of them right there at the counter, stuffed the other in his pocket, and then out he came, a bulge in his coat, a flustered look on his reddened face.

Because the mom and pop who ran the dump were neighbors of ours, living just down the tar-blistered road, I hated them all the more for poisoning my father. I wanted to sneak in their store and smash the bottles and set fire to the place. I also hated the Gallo brothers, Ernest and Julio, whose jovial faces beamed from the labels of their wine, labels I would find, torn and curled, when I burned the trash. I noted the Gallo brothers' address in California and studied the road atlas to see how far that was from Ohio,

because I meant to go out there and tell Ernest and Julio what they were doing to my father, and then, if they showed no mercy, I would kill them.

While growing up on the back roads and in the country schools and cramped Methodist churches of Ohio and Tennessee, I never heard the word *alcoholic*, never happened across it in books or magazines. In the nearby towns, there were no addiction-treatment programs, no community mental-health centers, no Alcoholics Anonymous chapters, no therapists. Left alone with our grievous secret, we had no way of understanding Father's drinking except as an act of will, a deliberate folly or cruelty, a moral weakness, a sin. He drank because he chose to, pure and simple. Why our father, so playful and competent and kind when sober, would choose to ruin himself and punish his family we could not fathom.

Our neighborhood was high on the Bible, and the Bible was hard on drunkards. "Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink," wrote Isaiah. "The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink, they are confused with wine, they err in vision, they stumble in giving judgment. For all tables are full of vomit, no place is without filthiness." We children had seen those fouled tables at the local truck stop where the notorious boozers hung out, our father occasionally among them. "Wine and new wine take away the understanding," declared the prophet Hosea. We had also seen evidence of that in our father, who could multiply seven-digit numbers in his head when sober but when drunk could not help us with fourth-grade math. Proverbs warned: "Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind utter perverse things." Woe, woe.

Dismayingly often, these biblical drunkards stirred up trouble for their own kids. Noah made fresh wine after the flood, drank too much of it, fell asleep without any clothes on, and was glimpsed in the buff by his son Ham, whom Noah promptly cursed. In one passage—it was so shocking we had to read it under our blankets with flashlights—the patriarch Lot fell down drunk and slept with his daughters. The sins of the fathers set their children's teeth on edge.

Our ministers were fond of quoting St. Paul's pronouncement that drunkards would not inherit the kingdom of God. These grave preachers assured us that the wine referred to in the Last Supper was in fact grape juice. Bible and sermons and hymns combined to give us the impression that Moses should have brought down from the mountain another stone tablet, bearing the Eleventh Commandment: Thou shalt not drink.

The scariest and most illuminating Bible story apropos of drunkards was the one about the lunatic and the swine. We knew it by heart: When Jesus climbed out of his boat one day, this lunatic came charging up from the graveyard, stark naked and filthy, frothing at the mouth, so violent that he broke the strongest chains. Nobody would go near him. Night and day for years, this madman had been wailing among the tombs and bruising

33

himself with stones. Jesus took one look at him and said, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirits!" for he could see that the lunatic was possessed by demons. Meanwhile, some hogs were conveniently rooting nearby. "If we have to come out," begged the demons, "at least let us go into those swine." Jesus agreed, the unclean spirits entered the hogs, and the hogs raced straight off a cliff and plunged into a lake. Hearing the story in Sunday school, my friends thought mainly of the pigs. (How big a splash did they make? Who paid for the lost pork?) But I thought of the redeemed lunatic, who bathed himself and put on clothes and calmly sat at the feet of Jesus, restored—so the Bible said—to "his right mind."

When drunk, our father was clearly in his wrong mind. He became a stranger, as fearful to us as any graveyard lunatic, not quite frothing at the mouth but fierce enough, quick-tempered, explosive; or else he grew maudlin and weepy, which frightened us nearly as much. In my boyhood despair, I reasoned that maybe he wasn't to blame for turning into an ogre: Maybe, like the lunatic, he was possessed by demons.

If my father was indeed possessed, who would exorcise him? If he was a sinner, who would save him? If he was ill, who would cure him? If he suffered, who would ease his pain? Not ministers or doctors, for we could not bring ourselves to confide in them; not the neighbors, for we pretended they had never seen him drunk; not Mother, who fussed and pleaded but could not budge him; not my brother and sister, who were only kids. That left me. It did not matter that I, too, was only a child, and a bewildered one at that. I could not excuse myself.

On first reading a description of delirium tremens—in a book on alcoholism I smuggled from a university library—I thought immediately of the frothing lunatic and the frenzied swine. When I read stories or watched films about grisly metamorphoses—Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the mild husband changing into a werewolf, the kindly neighbor inhabited by a brutal alien—I could not help but see my own father's mutation from sober to drunk. Even today, knowing better, I am attracted by the demonic theory of drink, for when I recall my father's transformation, the emergence of his ugly second self, I find it easy to believe in being possessed by unclean spirits. We never knew which version of Father would come home from work, the true or the tainted, nor could we guess how far down the slope toward cruelty he would slide.

How far a man *could* slide we gauged by observing our backroad neighbors—the out-of-work miners who had dragged their families to our corner of Ohio from the desolate hollows of Appalachia, the tightfisted farmers, the surly mechanics, the balked and broken men. There was, for example, whiskey-soaked Mr. Jenkins, who beat his wife and kids so hard we could hear their screams from the road. There was Mr. Lavo the wino, who fell asleep smoking time and again, until one night his disgusted wife bundled up the children and went outside and left him in his easy chair to burn; he awoke on his own, staggered out coughing into the yard,



Describe and interpret this picture, with relevance to Sanders's essay "Under the Influence" and to your own experience. In what ways can this picture be read—and by whom—as an invitation to party? In what ways—and by whom—can this picture be read as a cautionary tale?

and pounded her flat while the children looked on and the shack turned to ash. There was the truck driver, Mr. Sampson, who tripped over his son's tricycle one night while drunk and got mad, jumped into his semi, and drove away, shifting through the dozen gears, and never came back. We saw the bruised children of these fathers clump onto our school bus, we saw the abandoned children huddle in the pews at church, we saw the stunned and battered mothers begging for help at our doors.

Our own father never beat us, and I don't think he beat Mother, but he threatened often. The Old Testament Yahweh was not more terrible in His rage. Eyes blazing, voice booming, Father would pull out his belt and swear to give us a whipping, but he never followed through, never needed to, because we could imagine it so vividly. He shoved us, pawed us with the back of his hand, not to injure, just to clear a space. I can see him grabbing Mother by the hair as she cowers on a chair during a nightly quarrel. He twists her neck back until she gapes up at him, and then he lifts over her skull a glass quart bottle of milk, and milk spilling down his forearm, and he yells at her, "Say just one more word, one goddamn word, and I'll shut you up!" I fear she will prick him with her sharp tongue, but she is terrified into silence, and so am I, and the leaking bottle quivers in the air, and milk seeps through the red hair of my father's uplifted arm, and the entire scene is there to this moment, the head jerked back, the club raised.

36

When the drink made him weepy, Father would pack, kiss each of us children on the head, and announce from the front door that he was moving out. "Where to?" we demanded, fearful each time that he would leave for good, as Mr. Sampson had roared away for good in his diesel truck. "Someplace where I won't get hounded every minute," Father would answer, his jaw quivering. He stabbed a look at Mother, who might say, "Don't run into the ditch before you get there," or "Good riddance," and then he would slink away. Mother watched him go with arms crossed over her chest, her face closed like the lid on a box of snakes. We children bawled. Where could he go? To the truck stop, that den of iniquity? To one of those dark, ratty flophouses in town? Would he wind up sleeping under a railroad bridge or on a park bench or in a cardboard box, mummied in rags like the bums we had seen on our trips to Cleveland and Chicago? We bawled and bawled, wondering if he would ever come back.

He always did come back, a day or a week later, but each time there was a sliver less of him.

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which opens famously with Gregor Samsa waking up from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into an insect, Gregor's family keep reassuring themselves that things will be just fine again "when he comes back to us." Each time alcohol transformed our father we held out the same hope, that he would really and truly come back to us, our authentic father, the tender and playful and competent man, and then all things would be fine. We had grounds for such hope. After his tearful departures and chapfallen returns, he would sometimes go weeks, even months, without drinking. Those were glad times. Every day without the furtive glint of bottles, every meal without a fight, every bedtime without sobs encouraged us to believe that such bliss might go on forever.

Mother was fooled by such a hope all during the forty-odd years she knew Greeley Ray Sanders. Soon after she met him in a Chicago delicatessen on the eve of World War II and fell for his butter-melting Mississippi drawl and his wavy red hair, she learned that he drank heavily. But then so did a lot of men. She would soon coax or scold him into breaking the nasty habit. She would point out to him how ugly and foolish it was, this bleary drinking, and then he would quit. He refused to quit during their engagement, however, still refused during the first years of marriage, refused until my older sister came along. The shock of fatherhood sobered him, and he remained sober through my birth at the end of the war and right on through until we moved in 1951 to the Ohio arsenal. The arsenal had more than its share of alcoholics, drug addicts, and other varieties of escape artists. There I turned six and started school and woke into a child's flickering awareness, just in time to see my father begin sneaking swigs in the garage.

He sobered up again for most of a year at the height of the Korean War, to celebrate the birth of my brother. But aside from that dry spell, his only breaks from drinking before I graduated from high school were just long enough to raise and then dash our hopes. Then during the fall of my

senior year—the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when it seemed that the nightly explosions at the munitions dump and the nightly rages in our household might spread to engulf the globe—Father collapsed. His liver, kidneys, and heart all conked out. The doctors saved him, but only by a hair. He stayed in the hospital for weeks, going through a withdrawal so terrible that Mother would not let us visit him. If he wanted to kill himself, the doctors solemnly warned him, all he had to do was hit the bottle again. One binge would finish him.

Father must have believed them, for he stayed dry the next fifteen years. It was an answer to prayer, Mother said, it was a miracle. I believe it was a reflex of fear, which he sustained over the years through courage and pride. He knew a man could die from drink, for his brother Roscoe had. We children never laid eyes on doomed Uncle Roscoe, but in the stories Mother told us he became a fairy-tale figure, like a boy who took the wrong turn in the woods and was gobbled up by the wolf.

The fifteen-year dry spell came to an end with Father's retirement in the spring of 1978. Like many men, he gave up his identity along with his job. One day he was a boss at the factory, with a brass plate on his door and a reputation to uphold; the next day he was a nobody at home. He and Mother were leaving Ontario, the last of the many places to which his job had carried them, and they were moving to a new house in Mississippi, his childhood stomping ground. As a boy in Mississippi, Father sold Coca-Cola during dances while the moonshiners peddled their brew in the parking lot; as a young blade, he fought in bars and in the ring, winning a state Golden Gloves championship; he gambled at poker, hunted pheasant, raced motorcycles and cars, played semiprofessional baseball, and, along with all his buddies—in the Black Cat Saloon, behind the cotton gin, in the woods—he drank hard. It was a perilous youth to dream of recovering.

After his final day of work, Mother drove on ahead with a car full of begonias and violets, while Father stayed behind to oversee the packing. When the van was loaded, the sweaty movers broke open a six-pack and offered him a beer.

"Let's drink to retirement!" they crowed. "Let's drink to freedom! to 43 fishing! hunting! loafing! Let's drink to a guy who's going home!"

At least I imagine some such words, for that is all I can do, imagine, and I see Father's hand trembling in midair as he thinks about the fifteen sober years and about the doctors' warning, and he tells himself, *Goddamnit*, *I am a free man*, and *Why can't a free man drink one beer after a lifetime of hard work?* and I see his arm reaching, his fingers closing, the can tilting to his lips. I even supply a label for the beer, a swaggering brand that promises on television to deliver the essence of life. I watch the amber liquid pour down his throat, the alcohol steal into his blood, the key turn in his brain.

Soon after my parents moved back to Father's treacherous stomping 45 ground, my wife and I visited them in Mississippi with our four-year-old daughter. Mother had been too distraught to warn me about the return

47

50

of the demons. So when I climbed out of the car that bright July morning and saw my father napping in the hammock, I felt uneasy, and when he lurched upright and blinked his bloodshot eyes and greeted us in a syrupy voice, I was hurled back into childhood.

"What's the matter with Papaw?" our daughter asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing!"

Like a child again, I pretended not to see him in his stupor, and behind my phony smile I grieved. On that visit and on the few that remained before his death, once again I found bottles in the workbench, bottles in the woods. Again his hands shook too much for him to run a saw, to make his precious miniature furniture, to drive straight down back roads. Again he wound up in the ditch, in the hospital, in jail, in the treatment center. Again he shouted and wept. Again he lied. "I never touched a drop," he swore. "Your mother's making it up."

I no longer fancied I could reason with the men whose names I found on the bottles—Jim Beam, Jack Daniel's—but I was able now to recall the cold statistics about alcoholism: ten million victims, fifteen million, twenty. And yet, in spite of my age, I reacted in the same blind way as I had in childhood, by vainly seeking to erase through my efforts whatever drove him to drink. I worked on their place twelve and sixteen hours a day, in the swelter of Mississippi summers, digging ditches, running electrical wires, planting trees, mowing grass, building sheds, as though what nagged at him was some list of chores, as though by taking his worries upon my shoulders I could redeem him. I was flung back into boyhood, acting as though my father would not drink himself to death if only I were perfect.

I failed of perfection; he succeeded in dying. To the end, he considered himself not sick but sinful. "Do you want to kill yourself?" I asked him. "Why not?" he answered. "Why the hell not? What's there to save?" To the end, he would not speak about his feelings, would not or could not give a name to the beast that was devouring him.

In silence, he went rushing off to the cliff. Unlike the biblical swine, however, he left behind a few of the demons to haunt his children. Life with him and the loss of him twisted us into shapes that will be familiar to other sons and daughters of alcoholics. My brother became a rebel, my sister retreated into shyness, I played the stalwart and dutiful son who would hold the family together. If my father was unstable, I would be a rock. If he squandered money on drink, I would pinch every penny. If he wept when drunk—and only when drunk—I would not let myself weep at all. If he roared at the Little League umpire for calling my pitches balls, I would throw nothing but strikes. Watching him flounder and rage, I came to dread the loss of control. I would go through life without making anyone mad. I vowed never to put in my mouth or veins any chemical that would banish my everyday self. I would never make a scene, never lash out at the ones I loved, never hurt a soul. Through hard work, relentless work, I would achieve something dazzling—in the classroom, on the basketball court, in the science lab, in the pages of books—and my achievement would distract the world's eyes from his humiliation. I would become a worthy sacrifice, and the smoke of my burning would please God.

It is far easier to recognize these twists in my character than to undo them. Work has become an addiction for me, as drink was an addiction for my father. Knowing this, my daughter gave me a placard for the wall: WORKAHOLIC. The labor is endless and futile, for I can no more redeem myself through work than I could redeem my father. I still panic in the face of other people's anger, because his drunken temper was so terrible. I shrink from causing sadness or disappointment even to strangers, as though I were still concealing the family shame. I still notice every twitch of emotion in those faces around me, having learned as a child to read the weather in faces, and I blame myself for their least pang of unhappiness or anger. In certain moods I blame myself for everything. Guilt burns like acid in my veins.

I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten, is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father. He tells me that when I am gripped by sadness, he feels responsible; he feels there must be something he can do to spring me from depression, to fix my life and that crushing sense of responsibility is exactly what I felt at the age of ten in the face of my father's drinking. My son wonders if I, too, am possessed. I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me—the fear, the guilt, the shame—so that my own children may be spared.

I still shy away from nightclubs, from bars, from parties where the solvent is alcohol. My friends puzzle over this, but it is no more peculiar than for a man to shy away from the lions' den after seeing his father torn apart. I took my own first drink at the age of twenty-one, half a glass of burgundy. I knew the odds of my becoming an alcoholic were four times higher than for the children of nonalcoholic fathers. So I sipped warily.

I still do—once a week, perhaps, a glass of wine, a can of beer, nothing stronger, nothing more. I listen for the turning of a key in my brain.

Content

- 1. This essay abounds in examples of alcoholism. Which examples are the most memorable? Are these also the most painful? The most powerful? Explain why.
- 2. Sanders says that in spite of all his "grown-up knowledge" of alcoholism, "I am still ten years old, my own son's age" (¶ 8) as he writes this essay. What does he mean by this? What kind of a character is Sanders in this essay? What kind of a character is his father? Is there any resemblance between father and son?

Strategies/Structures/Language

3. Is Sanders writing for alcoholic readers? Their families? People unfamiliar with the symptoms of alcoholism? Or is he writing mostly for himself, to try to come to terms with the effects of his father's alcoholism on him then and now?

- 4. Each section of this essay (¶s 1–8, 9–14, 15–24, 25–31, 32–36, 37–44, 45–52, 53–55) focuses on a different sort of example. What are they, and why are they arranged in this particular order?
- 5. Why does Sanders wait until late in the essay (¶ 39) to discuss his father's sobriety, and then devote only three paragraphs to a state that lasted fifteen years?
- 6. What is the tone of this essay? How does Sanders, one of the victims of alcoholism as both a child and an adult, avoid being full of self-pity? Is he angry at his father? How can you tell?

For Writing

- 7. "Father's drinking became the family secret," says Sanders (¶ 13). Every family has significant secrets. Explain one of your family secrets, illustrating its effects on various family members, particularly on yourself. If you wish to keep the secret, don't show your essay to anyone; the point of writing this is to help yourself understand or come to terms with the matter.
- 8. Define an economic, political, ecological, social, or personal problem (unemployment, waste disposal, AIDS, hunger, housing, racism, or another subject of your choice) so your readers can understand it from an unusual perspective—your own or that of your sources. Illustrate its causes, effects, or implications with several significant examples—perhaps those of a perpetrator or victim.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

SUZANNE BRITT

Britt was born in 1946 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and educated at Salem College and Washington University. A newspaper columnist and essayist, Britt, who describes herself as "stately, plump," says, "I talk, eat, drink, walk around the block, read, have a stream of company, and sit on the grass outside. I try not to preach, do handicrafts, camp, bowl, argue, visit relatives, or serve on committees." "That Lean and Hungry Look," first published in *Newsweek*, is a contemporary example of a classical mode of literature—the "character"—a common form of description in which the stereotypical features of a character type ("the angry man") or role ("the schoolboy," "the housewife") are identified and often satirized.

Britt's humorous defense of fat people was first published in 1978, before obesity became a national epidemic. At that time, it would have been read as a lighthearted reinforcement of people's right to indulge in hot fudge sundaes and "two doughnuts and a big orange drink anytime they wanted it," augmented by double fudge brownies. But three decades later, obesity is considered a national epidemic. Sixty-five percent of American adults—127 million—are estimated to be overweight, and 31 percent of

those are categorized as "obese" (having more than 30 percent body fat). These figures do not include the 15 percent of overweight school-age children. Complications from obesity, including strokes, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, some cancers, and kidney and gallbladder disorders, contribute to 300,000 deaths a year, lowering life expectancy and dramatically increasing health care costs—currently by over \$100 billion a year. How do these sobering statistics affect the reading of "That Lean and Hungry Look" today?

That Lean and Hungry Look

aesar was right. Thin people need watching. I've been watching them for most of my adult life, and I don't like what I see. When these narrow fellows spring at me, I quiver to my toes. Thin people come in all personalities, most of them menacing. You've got your "together" thin person, your mechanical thin person, your condescending thin person, your tsk-tsk thin person, your efficiency expert thin person. All of them are dangerous.

In the first place, thin people aren't fun. They don't know how to goof off, at least in the best, fat sense of the word. They've always got to be a doing. Give them a coffee break, and they'll jog around the block. Supply them with a quiet evening at home, and they'll fix the screen door and lick S&H green stamps. They say things like "there aren't enough hours in the day." Fat people never say that. Fat people think the day is too damn long already.

Thin people make me tired. They've got speedy little metabolisms that cause them to bustle briskly. They're forever rubbing their bony hands together and eying new problems to "tackle." I like to surround myself with sluggish, inert, easygoing fat people, the kind who believe that if you clean it up today, it'll just get dirty again tomorrow.

Some people say the business about the jolly fat person is a myth, that all of us chubbies are neurotic, sick, sad people. I disagree. Fat people may not be chortling all day long, but they're a hell of a lot *nicer* than the wizened and shriveled. Thin people turn surly, mean and hard at a young age because they never learn the value of a hot-fudge sundae for easing tension. Thin people don't like gooey soft things because they themselves are neither gooey nor soft. They are crunchy and dull, like carrots. They go straight to the heart of the matter while fat people let things stay all blurry and hazy and vague, the way things actually are. Thin people want to face the truth. Fat people know there is no truth. One of my thin friends is always staring at complex, unsolvable problems and saying, "The key thing is . . ." Fat people never say that. They know there isn't any such thing as the key thing about anything.

10

Thin people believe in logic. Fat people see all sides. The sides fat people see are rounded blobs, usually gray, always nebulous and truly not worth worrying about. But the thin persons persists. "If you consume more calories than you burn," says one of my thin friends, "you will gain weight. It's that simple." Fat people always grin when they hear statements like that. They know better.

Fat people realize that life is illogical and unfair. They know very well that God is not in his heaven and all is not right with the world. If God was up there, fat people could have two doughnuts and a big orange drink anytime they wanted it.

Thin people have a long list of logical things they are always spouting off to me. They hold up one finger at a time as they reel off these things, so I won't lose track. They speak slowly as if to a young child. The list is long and full of holes. It contains tidbits like "get a grip on yourself," "cigarettes kill," "cholesterol clogs," "fit as a fiddle," "ducks in a row," "organize" and "sound fiscal management." Phrases like that.

They think these 2,000-point plans lead to happiness. Fat people know happiness is elusive at best and even if they could get the kind thin people talk about, they wouldn't want it. Wisely, fat people see that such programs are too dull, too hard, too off the mark. They are never better than a whole cheesecake.

Fat people know all about the mystery of life. They are the ones acquainted with the night, with luck, with fate, with playing it by ear. One thin person I know once suggested that we arrange all the parts of a jigsaw puzzle into groups according to size, shape and color. He figured this would cut the time needed to complete the puzzle by at least 50 per cent. I said I wouldn't do it. One, I like to muddle through. Two, what good would it do to finish early? Three, the jigsaw puzzle isn't the important thing. The important thing is the fun of four people (one thin person included) sitting around a card table, working a jigsaw puzzle. My thin friend had no use for my list. Instead of joining us, he went outside and mulched the boxwoods. The three remaining fat people finished the puzzle and made chocolate, double-fudge brownies to celebrate.

The main problem with thin people is they oppress. Their good intentions, bony torsos, tight ships, neat corners, cerebral machinations and pat solutions loom like dark clouds over the loose, comfortable, spreadout, soft world of the fat. Long after fat people have removed their coats and shoes and put their feet up on the coffee table, thin people are still sitting on the edge of the sofa, looking neat as a pin, discussing rutabagas. Fat people are heavily into fits of laughter, slapping their thighs and whooping it up, while thin people are still politely waiting for the punch line.

Thin people are downers. They like math and morality and reasoned evaluating of the limitations of human beings. They have their skinny little acts together. They expound, prognose, probe and prick.

Fat people are convivial. They will like you even if you're irregular and have acne. They will come up with a good reason why you never wrote the great American novel. They will cry in your beer with you. They will put your name in the pot. They will let you off the hook. Fat people will gab, giggle, guffaw, gallumph, gyrate and gossip. They are generous, giving and gallant. They are gluttonous and goodly and great. What you want when you're down is soft and jiggly, not muscled and stable. Fat people know this. Fat people have plenty of room. Fat people will take you in.

Content

- 1. Britt is describing two categories of people, thin and fat. Does she stereotype them? If so, what does she gain from stereotyping? If not, how does she individualize each category? Is her depiction accurate? Why or why not?
- 2. Why has she chosen to overlook characteristics typical of either group—for instance, the effects on one's health of being either too fat or too thin? Does she treat thin people fairly? Does she intend to do so?
- 3. For the purpose of contrast, Britt has concentrated on the differences between fat and thin people. What similarities, if any, do they have? Are these related to their weight?

Strategies/Structures/Language

- 4. Throughout, Britt makes blanket generalizations about both thin and fat people. Does she support these? Is her evidence appropriate? Is it sufficiently comprehensive to make her case?
- 5. At what point in the essay do you realize that Britt is being humorous? Does her humor reinforce or undermine her point? Explain your answer. Is the humor appropriate for today's readers?
- 6. Britt's language is conversational, sometimes slangy: "Thin people are downers. . . . They have their skinny little acts together" (\P 11). In what ways does the language reinforce what Britt says about fat people?

For Writing

- 7. Write a humorous essay in which you divide a larger category (such as students, parents, Southerners, Easterners, Californians) into subcategories as Britt does in the first paragraph, and then characterize each subcategory through comparing and contrasting its parts (working students, athletes, nerds, partiers). Writing collaboratively, each partner could describe one category or subcategory. Photographs, drawings, or cartoons can enhance the descriptions.
- 8. By yourself or with a partner, select one major cause of obesity in America today, research its causes, and provide a workable solution to the problem.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

ISTVAN BANYAI

Inflation



What's the story here? What changes—in the figure and in the cost of the postage stamp—occur in the successive panels? Do they need any captions? What's the point of using "Inflation" as a title? Can you think of any alternate titles that would work as well?

MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain (a riverman's term for "two fathoms deep," the pen name of Samuel Clemens) celebrated in his writing a lifelong love affair with the Mississippi River and with the rural life along its banks. In *The Adventures* of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), he immortalized the riverfront town of Hannibal, Missouri, where he was born (1835) and whose folkways he absorbed. A prolific writer, Twain's works grew increasingly pessimistic as he experienced grief (the death of his beloved daughter) and economic reversals later in life. Nevertheless, in his Autobiography (published in 1924, fourteen years after his death), Twain depicted an idyllic but comically realistic picture of a country childhood, specific in time (pre-Civil War) and place (in the country, four miles from Florida, Missouri), yet timeless and ubiquitous. The autobiography shows us two central characters, the boy Sam Clemens, who enjoyed every aspect of his Uncle John Quarles's farm, and Mark Twain, the older, wiser, and sometimes more cynical author, who writes these reminiscences after alerting readers to bear in mind that he can "remember anything, whether it had happened or not." What he remembers is the spirit of the farm, the people who lived there, white and black, and how they lived in abiding harmony.

Twain reinforces that spirit with an abundance of sensory details—often the mainstay of description, as they are here. Thus he evokes a rich sensory intermingling in descriptions such as the following: "I can call back the solemn twilight [sight] and mystery of the deep woods, the earthy smells, the faint odors of the wild flowers [smell], the sheen of rain-washed foliage [sight], the rattling clatter of drops when the wind shook the trees, the far-off hammering of woodpeckers [sound]. . . . I can see the blue clusters of wild grapes . . . and I remember the taste of them and the smell" [sight, taste, smell] (¶ 13).

Uncle John's Farm¹

F or many years I believed that I remembered helping my grandfather drink his whiskey toddy when I was six weeks old, but I do not tell about that any more, now; I am grown old, and my memory is not as active as it used to be. When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying, now, and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that [never] happened. It is sad to go to pieces like this, but we all have to do it.

My uncle, John A. Quarles, was a farmer, and his place was in the country four miles from Florida. He had eight children, and fifteen or twenty negroes, and was also fortunate in other ways. Particularly in his character.

¹Title supplied.

I have not come across a better man than he was. I was his guest for two or three months every year, from the fourth year after we removed to Hannibal till I was eleven or twelve years old. I have never consciously used him or his wife in a book, but his farm has come very handy to me in literature, once or twice. In *Huck Finn* and in *Tom Sawyer Detective* I moved it down to Arkansas. It was all of six hundred miles, but it was no trouble, it was not a very large farm; five hundred acres, perhaps, but I could have done it if it had been twice as large. And as for the morality of it, I cared nothing for that; I would move a State if the exigencies of literature required it.

It was a heavenly place for a boy, that farm of my uncle John's. The house was a double log one, with a spacious floor (roofed in) connecting it with the kitchen. In the summer the table was set in the middle of that shady and breezy floor, and the sumptuous meals—well, it makes me cry to think of them. Fried chicken, roast pig, wild and tame turkeys, ducks and geese; venison just killed; squirrels, rabbits, pheasants, partridges, prairie-chickens; biscuits, hot batter cakes, hot buckwheat cakes, hot "wheat bread," hot rolls, hot corn pone; fresh corn boiled on the ear, succotash, butterbeans, string-beans, tomatoes, pease, Irish potatoes, sweetpotatoes; buttermilk, sweet milk, "clabber"; watermelons, muskmelons, cantaloupe—all fresh from the garden—apple pie, peach pie, pumpkin pie, apple dumplings, peach cobbler—I can't remember the rest. The way that the things were cooked was perhaps the main splendor—particularly a certain few of the dishes. For instance, the corn bread, the hot biscuits and wheat bread, and the fried chicken. These things have never been properly cooked in the North—in fact, no one there is able to learn the art, so far as my experience goes. The North thinks it knows how to make corn bread, but this is gross superstition. Perhaps no bread in the world is quite as good as Southern corn bread, and perhaps no bread in the world is quite so bad as the Northern imitation of it. The North seldom tries to fry chicken, and this is well; the art cannot be learned north of the line of Mason and Dixon, nor anywhere in Europe. . . .

It seems a pity that the world should throw away so many good things merely because they are unwholesome. I doubt if God has given us any refreshment which, taken in moderation, is unwholesome, except microbes. Yet there are people who strictly deprive themselves of each and every eatable, drinkable and smokable which has in any way acquired a shady reputation. They pay this price for health. And health is all they get for it. How strange it is; it is like paying out your whole fortune for a cow that has gone dry. . . .

The farmhouse stood in the middle of a very large yard, and the yard was fenced on three sides with rails and on the rear side with high palings; against these stood the smokehouse; beyond the palings was the orchard; beyond the orchard were the negro quarter and the tobaccofields. The front yard was entered over a stile, made of sawed-off logs of graduated heights; I do not remember any gate. In a corner of the front

yard were a dozen lofty hickory-trees and a dozen black-walnuts, and in the nutting season riches were to be gathered there.

Down a piece, abreast the house, stood a little log cabin against the rail fence; and there the woody hill fell sharply away, past the barns, the corncrib, the stables and the tobacco-curing house, to a limpid brook which sang along over its gravelly bed and curved and frisked in and out and here and there and yonder in the deep shade of overhanging foliage and vines—a divine place for wading, and it had swimming-pools, too, which were forbidden to us and therefore much frequented by us. For we were little Christian children, and had early been taught the value of forbidden fruit. . . .

I can see the farm yet, with perfect clearness. I can see all its belongings, all its details; the family room of the house, with a "trundle" bed in one corner and a spinning-wheel in another, a wheel whose rising and falling wail, heard from a distance, was the mournfulest of all sounds to me, and made me homesick and low-spirited, and filled my atmosphere with the wandering spirits of the dead; the vast fireplace, piled high, on winter nights, with flaming hickory logs from whose ends a sugary sap bubbled out but did not go to waste, for we scraped it off and ate it; the lazy cat spread out on the rough hearthstones, the drowsy dogs braced against the jambs and blinking; my aunt in one chimney-corner knitting, my uncle in the other smoking his corn-cob pipe; the slick and carpetless oak floor faintly mirroring the dancing flame-tongues and freckled with black indentations where fire-coals had popped out and died a leisurely death; half a dozen children romping in the background twilight; "split"-bottomed chairs here and there, some with rockers; a cradle—out of service, but waiting, with confidence; in the early cold mornings a snuggle of children, in shirts and chemises, occupying the hearthstone and procrastinating—they could not bear to leave that comfortable place and go out on the wind-swept floor-space between the house and kitchen where the general tin basin stood, and wash.

Along outside of the front fence ran the country road; dusty in the summertime, and a good place for snakes—they liked to lie in it and sun themselves; when they were rattlesnakes or puff adders, we killed them; when they were black snakes, or racers, or belonged to the fabled "hoop" breed, we fled, without shame; when they were "house snakes" or "garters" we carried them home and put them in Aunt Patsy's work-basket for a surprise; for she was prejudiced against snakes, and always when she took the basket in her lap and they began to climb out of it it disordered her mind. She never could seem to get used to them; her opportunities went for nothing. And she was always cold toward bats, too, and could not bear them; and yet I think a bat is as friendly a bird as there is. My mother was Aunt Patsy's sister, and had the same wild superstitions. A bat is beautifully soft and silky; I do not know any creature that is pleasanter to the touch, or is more grateful for caressings, if offered in the right spirit. I know all about these coleoptera, because our great cave, three miles below

10

11

Hannibal, was multitudinously stocked with them, and often I brought them home to amuse my mother with. It was easy to manage if it was a school day, because then I had ostensibly been to school and hadn't any bats. She was not a suspicious person, but full of trust and confidence; and when I said "There's something in my coat pocket for you," she would put her hand in. But she always took it out again, herself; I didn't have to tell her. It was remarkable, the way she couldn't learn to like private bats. . . .

Beyond the road where the snakes sunned themselves was a dense young thicket, and through it a dim-lighted path led a quarter of a mile; then out of the dimness one emerged abruptly upon a level great prairie which was covered with wild strawberry-plants, vividly starred with prairie pinks, and walled in on all sides by forests. The strawberries were fragrant and fine, and in the season we were generally there in the crisp freshness of the early morning, while the dew-beads still sparkled upon the grass and the woods were ringing with the first songs of the birds.

Down the forest slopes to the left were the swings. They were made of bark stripped from hickory saplings. When they became dry they were dangerous. They usually broke when a child was forty feet in the air, and this was why so many bones had to be mended every year. I had no illluck myself, but none of my cousins escaped. There were eight of them, and at one time and another they broke fourteen arms among them. But it cost next to nothing, for the doctor worked by the year—\$25 for the whole family. I remember two of the Florida doctors, Chowning and Meredith. They not only tended an entire family for \$25 a year, but furnished the medicines themselves. Good measures, too. Only the largest persons could hold a whole dose. Castor-oil was the principal beverage. The dose was half a dipperful, with half a dipperful of New Orleans molasses added to help it down and make it taste good, which it never did. The next standby was calomel; the next, rhubarb; and the next, jalap. Then they bled the patient, and put mustard-plasters on him. It was a dreadful system, and yet the death-rate was not heavy. The calomel was nearly sure to salivate the patient and cost him some of his teeth. There were no dentists. When teeth became touched with decay or were otherwise ailing, the doctor knew of but one thing to do: he fetched his tongs and dragged them out. If the jaw remained, it was not his fault. Doctors were not called, in cases of ordinary illness; the family's grandmother attended to those. . . .

The country schoolhouse was three miles from my uncle's farm. It stood in a clearing in the woods, and would hold about twenty-five boys and girls. We attended the school with more or less regularity once or twice a week, in summer, walking to it in the cool of the morning by the forest paths, and back in the gloaming at the end of the day. All the pupils brought their dinners in baskets—corn-dodger, buttermilk and other good things—and sat in the shade of the trees at noon and ate them. It is the part of my education which I look back upon with the most satisfaction. My first visit to the school was when I was seven. A strapping girl of fifteen, in the customary sunbonnet and calico dress, asked me if I "used

tobacco"—meaning did I chew it. I said, no. It roused her scorn. She reported me to all the crowd, and said—

"Here is a boy seven years old who can't chaw tobacco."

By the looks and comments which this produced, I realized that I was a degraded object; I was cruelly ashamed of myself. I determined to reform. But I only made myself sick; I was not able to learn to chew tobacco. I learned to smoke fairly well, but that did not conciliate anybody, and I remained a poor thing, and characterless. I longed to be respected, but I never was able to rise. Children have but little charity for each other's defects.

As I have said, I spent some part of every year at the farm until I was 14 twelve or thirteen years old. The life which I led there with my cousins was full of charm, and so is the memory of it yet. I can call back the solemn twilight and mystery of the deep woods, the earthy smells, the faint odors of the wild flowers, the sheen of rain-washed foliage, the rattling clatter of drops when the wind shook the trees, the far-off hammering of woodpeckers and the muffled drumming of wood-pheasants in the remoteness of the forest, the snap-shot glimpses of disturbed wild creatures skurrying through the grass,—I can call it all back and make it as real as it ever was, and as blessed. I can call back the prairie, and its loneliness and peace, and a vast hawk hanging motionless in the sky, with his wings spread wide and the blue of the vault showing through the fringe of their end-feathers. I can see the woods in their autumn dress, the oaks purple, the hickories washed with gold, the maples and the sumacs luminous with crimson fires, and I can hear the rustle made by the fallen leaves as we ploughed through them. I can see the blue clusters of wild grapes hanging amongst the foliage of the saplings, and I remember the taste of them and the smell. I know how the wild blackberries looked, and how they tasted; and the same with the pawpaws, the hazelnuts and the persimmons; and I can feel the thumping rain, upon my head, of hickory-nuts and walnuts when we were out in the frosty dawn to scramble for them with the pigs, and the gusts of wind loosed them and sent them down. I know the stain of blackberries, and how pretty it is; and I know the stain of walnut hulls, and how little it minds soap and water; also what grudged experience it had of either of them. I know the taste of maple sap, and when to gather it, and how to arrange the troughs and the delivery tubes, and how to boil down the juice, and how to hook the sugar after it is made; also how much better hooked sugar tastes than any that is honestly come by, let bigots say what they will. I know how a prize watermelon looks when it is sunning its fat rotundity among pumpkinvines and "simblins"; I know how to tell when it is ripe without "plugging" it; I know how inviting it looks when it is cooling itself in a tub of water under the bed, waiting; I know how it looks when it lies on the table in the sheltered great floor-space between house and kitchen, and the children gathered for the sacrifice and their mouths watering; I know the crackling sound it makes when the carving-knife enters its end, and I can see the split fly along in front of the blade as the knife cleaves its way to the other end; I can see its halves fall apart and display the rich red meat and the black

seeds, and the heart standing up, a luxury fit for the elect; I know how a boy looks, behind a yard-long slice of that melon, and I know how he feels; for I have been there. I know the taste of the watermelon which has been honestly come by, and I know the taste of the watermelon which has been acquired by art. Both taste good, but the experienced know which tastes best. I know the look of green apples and peaches and pears on the trees, and I know how entertaining they are when they are inside of a person. I know how ripe ones look when they are piled in pyramids under the trees, and how pretty they are and how vivid their colors. I know how a frozen apple looks, in a barrel down cellar in the winter-time, and how hard it is to bite, and how the frost makes the teeth ache, and yet how good it is, notwithstanding. I know the disposition of elderly people to select the specked apples for the children, and I once knew ways to beat the game. I know the look of an apple that is roasting and sizzling on a hearth on a winter's evening, and I know the comfort that comes of eating it hot, along with some sugar and a drench of cream. I know the delicate art and mystery of so cracking hickory-nuts and walnuts on a flatiron with a hammer that the kernels will be delivered whole, and I know how the nuts, taken in conjunction with winter apples, cider and doughnuts, make old people's tales and old jokes sound fresh and crisp and enchanting, and juggle an evening away before you know what went with the time. I know the look of Uncle Dan'I's kitchen as it was on privileged nights when I was a child, and I can see the white and black children grouped on the hearth, with the firelight playing on their faces and the shadows flickering upon the walls, clear back toward the cavernous gloom of the rear, and I can hear Uncle Dan'l telling the immortal tales which Uncle Remus Harris was to gather into his books and charm the world with, by and by; and I can feel again the creepy joy which quivered through me when the time for the ghost-story of the "Golden Arm" was reached—and the sense of regret, too, which came over me, for it was always the last story of the evening, and there was nothing between it and the unwelcome bed.

I can remember the bare wooden stairway in my uncle's house, and the turn to the left above the landing, and the rafters and the slanting roof over my bed, and the squares of moonlight on the floor, and the white cold world of snow outside, seen through the curtainless window. I can remember the howling of the wind and the quaking of the house on stormy nights, and how snug and cozy one felt, under the blankets, listening, and how the powdery snow used to sift in, around the sashes, and lie in little ridges on the floor, and make the place look chilly in the morning, and curb the wild desire to get up—in case there was any. I can remember how very dark that room was, in the dark of the moon, and how packed it was with ghostly stillness when one woke up by accident away in the night, and forgotten sins came flocking out of the secret chambers of the memory and wanted a hearing; and how ill chosen the time seemed for this kind of business; and how dismal was the hoo-hooing of the owl and the wailing of the wolf, sent mourning by on the night wind.

I remember the raging of the rain on that roof, summer nights, and how pleasant it was to lie and listen to it, and enjoy the white splendor of the lightning and the majestic booming and crashing of the thunder. It was a very satisfactory room; and there was a lightning-rod which was reachable from the window, an adorable and skittish thing to climb up and down, summer nights, when there were duties on hand of a sort to make privacy desirable.

I remember the 'coon and 'possum hunts, night, and the negroes, and the long marches through the black gloom of the woods, and the excitement which fired everybody when the distant bay of an experienced dog announced that the game was treed; then the wild scramblings and stumblings through briars and bushes and over roots to get to the spot; then the lighting of a fire and the felling of the tree, the joyful frenzy of the dogs and the negroes, and the weird picture it all made in the red glare—I remember it all well, and the delight that every one got out of it, except the 'coon.

I remember the pigeon seasons, when the birds would come in millions, and cover the trees, and by their weight break down the branches. They were clubbed to death with sticks; guns were not necessary, and were not used. I remember the squirrel hunts, and the prairie-chicken hunts, and the wild-turkey hunts, and all that; and how we turned out, mornings, while it was still dark, to go on these expeditions, and how chilly and dismal it was, and how often I regretted that I was well enough to go. A toot on a tin horn brought twice as many dogs as were needed, and in their happiness they raced and scampered about, and knocked small people down, and made no end of unnecessary noise. At the word, they vanished away toward the woods, and we drifted silently after them in the melancholy gloom. But presently the gray dawn stole over the world, the birds piped up, then the sun rose and poured light and comfort all around, everything was fresh and dewy and fragrant, and life was a boon again. After three hours of tramping we arrived back wholesomely tired, overladen with game, very hungry, and just in time for breakfast.

Content

1. Even though Twain's opening two paragraphs warn that he is quite capable of remembering anything, "whether it had happened or not," what he says throughout this essay appears true and convincing. Why? Does anything seem too good to be true? What made the farm a "heavenly place for a boy"? Do his memories of children's broken bones (¶ 10) and his childhood shame at being unable to chew tobacco (¶s 11–13) diminish his pleasant recollections?

Strategies/Structures/Language

2. In places Twain's description involves long lists or catalogues—of foods (¶ 3), of the sights and sounds and activities of farm life (¶s 3–14), and of the seasons and seasonal activities (¶s 15–18). How does he vary the lists to keep them appealing?

- 3. Why does Twain pack so many details into such a long paragraph (¶ 14)? If he had broken it up, where could he have done so? With what effects?
- 4. In this largely descriptive account, Twain provides characterizations of the local doctors (\P 10), many interpretations ("The life was . . . full of charm," [\P 14]), and narration of incidents—for instance, of Aunt Patsy and the snakes (\P 8). Explain how these techniques contribute to the overall picture of life on the farm.
- 5. Twain uses the language of an adult to recall events from his childhood. Find a typical passage in which he enables us to see the experience as a child would but to imply or offer an adult's interpretation.

For Writing

- 6. Identify a place that had considerable significance—pleasant, indifferent, unpleasant, or a mixture—for you as a child, and describe it for an unfamiliar reader to emphasize your attitude toward it. Use sensory details, where appropriate, to help your readers to recreate your experiences. The essays by Amanda N. Cagle (191–95), Linda Hogan (273–76), Asiya S. Tschannerl (278–81), Megan McGuire (225–31), and Matt Nocton (527–31) provide good examples of how to do this.
- 7. Pick an aspect of your childhood relationship with a parent or other adult, or a critical experience in your precollege schooling, and describe it so the reader shares your experience. Compare, if you wish, with essays by E. B. White (97–103), Anne Fadiman (104–7), Frederick Douglass (109–13), Scott Russell Sanders (249–59), Ning Yu (173–82), or Megan McGuire (225–31).



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

LINDA HOGAN

Hogan's Chickasaw Indian heritage informs her work both as a creative writer and as a professor of American Indian studies, currently at the University of Colorado. She was born in Denver in 1947 and earned a BA at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and an MA in English and creative writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 1978. Seeing Through the Sun (1985) received an American Book Award for poetry. Her novels include Mean Spirit (1990), Solar Storms (1995), and Power (1998). Her recent work includes The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir (2001) and Face to Face (2004). "Dwellings" is the title essay of her collection Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World (1995).

"As an Indian woman," the introduction to her book begins, "I question our responsibilities to the caretaking of the future and to the other species who share our journeys. These writings have grown out of these questions, out of wondering what makes us human, out of lifelong love for the living world and all its inhabitants. They have grown, too, out of my native understanding that there is a terrestrial intelligence that lies beyond

our human knowing and grasping." She continues, "It has been my lifelong work to seek an understanding of the two views of the world, one as seen by native people and the other as seen by those who are new and young on this continent. It is clear that we have strayed from the treaties we once had with the land and with the animals. It is also clear, and heartening, that in our time there are many—Indian and non-Indian alike—who want to restore and honor these broken agreements."

Dwellings

ot far from where I live is a hill that was cut into by the moving water of a creek. Eroded this way, all that's left of it is a broken wall of earth that contains old roots and pebbles woven together and exposed. Seen from a distance, it is only a rise of raw earth. But up close it is something wonderful, a small cliff dwelling that looks almost as intricate and well made as those the Anasazi left behind when they vanished mysteriously centuries ago. This hill is a place that could be the starry skies of night turned inward into the thousand round holes where solitary bees have lived and died. It is a hill of tunneling rooms. At the mouths of some of the excavations, half-circles of clay beetle out like awnings shading a doorway. It is earth that was turned to clay in the mouths of the bees and spit out as they mined deeper into their dwelling places.

This place where the bees reside is at an angle safe from rain. It faces the southern sun. It is a warm and intelligent architecture of memory, learned by whatever memory lives in the blood. Many of the holes still contain the gold husks of dead bees, their faces dry and gone, their flat eyes gazing out from death's land toward the other uninhabited half of the hill that is across the creek from these catacombs.

The first time I found the residence of the bees, it was dusty summer. The sun was hot, and land was the dry color of rust. Now and then a car rumbled along the dirt road and dust rose up behind it before settling back down on older dust. In the silence, the bees made a soft droning hum. They were alive then, and working the hill, going out and returning with pollen, in and out through the holes, back and forth between daylight and the cooler, darker regions of inner earth. They were flying an invisible map through air, a map charted by landmarks, the slant of light, and a circling story they told one another about the direction of food held inside the center of yellow flowers.

Sitting in the hot sun, watching the small bees fly in and out around the hill, hearing the summer birds, the light breeze, I felt right in the world. I belonged there. I thought of my own dwelling places, those real and those imagined. Once I lived in a town called Manitou, which means "Great Spirit," and where hot mineral springwater gurgled beneath the streets

and rose up into open wells. I felt safe there. With the underground movement of water and heat a constant reminder of other life, of what lives beneath us, it seemed to be the center of the world.

A few years after that, I wanted silence. My daydreams were full of places I longed to be, shelters and solitudes. I wanted a room apart from others, a hidden cabin to rest in. I wanted to be in a redwood forest with trees so tall the owls called out in the daytime. I daydreamed of living in a vapor cave a few hours away from here. Underground, warm, and moist, I thought it would be the perfect world for staying out of cold winter, for escaping the noise of living.

And how often I've wanted to escape to a wilderness where a human hand has not been in everything. But those were only dreams of peace, of comfort, of a nest inside stone or woods, a sanctuary where a dream or life wouldn't be invaded.

- Years ago, in the next canyon west of here, there was a man who followed one of those dreams and moved into a cave that could only be reached by climbing down a rope. For years he lived there in comfort, like a troglodyte. The inner weather was stable, never too hot, too cold, too wet, or too dry. But then he felt lonely. His utopia needed a woman. He went to town until he found a wife. For a while after the marriage, his wife climbed down the rope along with him, but before long she didn't want the mice scurrying about in the cave, or the untidy bats that wanted to hang from stones of the ceiling. So they built a door. Because of the closed entryway, the temperature changed. They had to put in heat. Then the inner moisture of earth warped the door, so they had to have air-conditioning, and after that the earth wanted to go about life in its own way and it didn't give in to the people.
- In other days and places, people paid more attention to the strong-headed will of earth. Once homes were built of wood that had been felled from a single region in a forest. That way, it was thought, the house would hold together more harmoniously, and the family of walls would not fall or lend themselves to the unhappiness or arguments of the inhabitants.
- An Italian immigrant to Chicago, Aldo Piacenzi, built birdhouses that were dwellings of harmony and peace. They were the incredible spired shapes of cathedrals in Italy. They housed not only the birds, but also his memories, his own past. He painted them the watery blue of his Mediterranean, the wild rose of flowers in a summer field. Inside them was straw and the droppings of lives that layed eggs, fledglings who grew there. What places to inhabit, the bright and sunny birdhouses in dreary alleyways of the city.
- One beautiful afternoon, cool and moist, with the kind of yellow light that falls on earth in these arid regions, I waited for barn swallows to return from their daily work of food gathering. Inside the tunnel where they live,

hundreds of swallows had mixed their saliva with mud and clay, much like the solitary bees, and formed nests that were perfect as a potter's bowl. At five in the evening, they returned all at once, a dark, flying shadow. Despite their enormous numbers and the crowding together of nests, they didn't pause for even a moment before entering the nests, nor did they crowd one another. Instantly they vanished into the nests. The tunnel went silent. It held no outward signs of life.

But I knew they were there, filled with the fire of living. And what a marriage of elements was in those nests. Not only mud's earth and water, the fire of sun and dry air, but even the elements contained one another. The bodies of prophets and crazy men were broken down in that soil.

I've noticed often how when a house is abandoned, it begins to sag. Without a tenant, it has no need to go on. If it were a person, we'd say it is depressed or lonely. The roof settles in, the paint cracks, the walls and floorboards warp and slope downward in their own natural ways, telling us that life must stay in everything as the world whirls and tilts and moves through boundless space.

One summer day, cleaning up after long-eared owls where I work at a rehabilitation facility for birds of prey, I was raking the gravel floor of a flight cage. Down on the ground, something looked like it was moving. I bent over to look into the pile of bones and pellets I'd just raked together. There, close to the ground, were two fetal mice. They were new to the planet, pink and hairless. They were so tenderly young. Their faces had swollen blue-veined eyes. They were nestled in a mound of feathers, soft as velvet, each one curled up smaller than an infant's ear, listening to the first sounds of earth. But the ants were biting them. They turned in agony, unable to pull away, not yet having the arms or legs to move, but feeling, twisting away from, the pain of the bites. I was horrified to see them bitten out of life that way. I dipped them in water, as if to take away the sting, and let the ants fall in the bucket. Then I held the tiny mice in the palm of my hand. Some of the ants were drowning in the water. I was trading one life for another, exchanging the lives of ants for those of mice, but I hated their suffering, and hated even more that they had not yet grown to a life, and already they inhabited the miserable world of pain. Death and life feed each other. I know that.

Inside these rooms where birds are healed, there are other lives besides those of mice. There are fine gray globes the wasps have woven together, the white cocoons of spiders in a corner, the downward tunneling anthills. All these dwellings are inside one small walled space, but I think most about the mice. Sometimes the downy nests fall out of the walls where their mothers have placed them out of the way of their enemies. When one of the nests falls, they are so well made and soft, woven mostly from the chest feathers of birds. Sometimes the leg of a small quail holds the nest together like a slender cornerstone with dry, bent claws. The mice

have adapted to life in the presence of their enemies, adapted to living in the thin wall between beak and beak, claw and claw. They move their nests often, as if a new rafter or wall will protect them from the inevitable fate of all our returns home to the deeper, wider nest of earth that houses us all.

- One August at Zia Pueblo during the corn dance I noticed tourists picking up shards of all the old pottery that had been made and broken there. The residents of Zia know not to take the bowls and pots left behind by the older ones. They know that the fragments of those earlier lives need to be smoothed back to earth, but younger nations, travelers from continents across the world who have come to inhabit this land, have little of their own to grow on. The pieces of earth that were formed into bowls, even on their way home to dust, provide the new people a lifeline to an unknown land, help them remember that they live in the old nest of earth.
- It was in early February, during the mating season of the great horned owls. It was dusk, and I hiked up the back of a mountain to where I'd heard the owls a year before. I wanted to hear them again, the voices so tender, so deep, like a memory of comfort. I was halfway up the trail when I found a soft, round nest. It had fallen from one of the bare-branched trees. It was a delicate nest, woven together of feathers, sage, and strands of wild grass. Holding it in my hand in the rosy twilight, I noticed that a blue thread was entwined with the other gatherings there. I pulled at the thread a little, and then I recognized it. It was a thread from one of my skirts. It was blue cotton. It was the unmistakable color and shape of a pattern I knew. I liked it, that a thread of my life was in an abandoned nest, one that had held eggs and new life. I took the nest home. At home, I held it to the light and looked more closely. There, to my surprise, nestled into the gray-green sage, was a gnarl of black hair. It was also unmistakable. It was my daughter's hair, cleaned from a brush and picked up out in the sun beneath the maple tree, or the pit cherry where birds eat from the overladen, fertile branches until only the seeds remain on the trees.

I didn't know what kind of nest it was, or who had lived there. It didn't matter. I thought of the remnants of our lives carried up the hill that way and turned into shelter. That night, resting inside the walls of our home, the world outside weighed so heavily against the thin wood of the house. The sloped roof was the only thing between us and the universe. Everything outside of our wooden boundaries seemed so large. Filled with night's citizens, it all came alive. The world opened in the thickets of the dark. The wild grapes would soon ripen on the vines. The burrowing ones were emerging. Horned owls sat in treetops. Mice scurried here and there. Skunks, fox, the slow and holy porcupine, all were passing by this way. The young of the solitary bees were feeding on pollen in the dark. The whole world was a nest on its humble tilt, in the maze of the universe, holding us.

Content

- 1. Linda Hogan describes a variety of different types of dwellings. Choose two and explain what the relationship of these dwellings is to each other and to the natural setting in which they appear. In what ways does Hogan's selection and organization of information, particularly sensory details, convey her implicit judgments of those dwellings?
- 2. Why does Hogan describe such a variety of dwellings—human and animal? What elements of nature connect them with one another and with the lives of their occupants? In what ways are the descriptions of animals' dwellings as vivid as those of humans?

Strategies/Structures/Language

- 3. What determines the essay's overall order? To determine this, identify the topic of each paragraph in sequence. Which dwellings come first, in the middle, last? Which paragraphs don't discuss particular dwellings or types of dwellings—and where do they come? When Hogan is describing a particular dwelling, what sort of details does she begin with? Conclude with? With what effects?
- 4. Hogan uses many details as she describes both her own and others' dwellings. Is there a difference in the kind of details she uses to describe human dwellings and the kind of details she uses to describe nonhuman dwellings? If so, explain what the differences are. If not, identify the similarities.
- 5. Toward the conclusion of her essay Hogan accidentally stumbles upon a thread from one of her own skirts and "a gnarl of black hair" from her daughter's brush contained in a bird's nest (¶ 16). Why doesn't it matter to her that she "didn't know what kind of nest it was, or who had lived there" (¶ 17)? What does she mean by ending her essay with "The whole world was a nest on its humble tilt, in the maze of the universe, holding us" (¶ 17)? In what ways throughout the essay has Hogan prepared her readers for this conclusion? Compare and contrast Hogan's version of Indian history with Alexie's "What Sacagawea Means to Me" (94–95).

For Writing

6. Write an essay that describes your own dwelling (house, apartment, dorm room), or the house of another—human or animal. What details will you choose to include, and with what emphasis? What kinds of details will you leave out? Why? Do you want your readers to be attracted to your dwelling, or not? For what reasons?

Once you've written your essay, ask another student to read it and draw a sketch of the dwelling you've written about as she understands it. Does the sketch contain all the essential features? In the right proportions? Does it capture your attitude toward the dwelling? If not, what do you need to add to your essay, including diagrams, photographs, or floor plans, to convey its meaning?

7. Draw up a detailed outline for a descriptive essay of, say, a person or place you know well, and then revise that outline to reflect a different organizational pattern (see pages 285–89 for a discussion of types of organizational patterns). In a brief essay, consider the differences between the two organizational outlines.

What sorts of information do they highlight? For what types of audience might each be appropriate?



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

ASIYA S. TSCHANNERL

Asiya Tschannerl was adopted soon after her birth in Philadelphia in 1977 by parents of Indian and Austrian nationalities (her Austrian last name, *Tschannerl*, rhymes with *chunnel*, as in the name of the tunnel under the English Channel). Having lived in China, India, and parts of Africa and Europe, she feels that her ethnicity extends well beyond her African-American roots. In 1998 she earned a BSc in medical biochemistry from Royal Holloway, University of London, to which she has returned for graduate study in pursuit of an MD. She is currently a certified emergency medical technician, as well as an artist, composer, singer, cellist, and writer.

Asiya believes that her best writing stems from subjects she knows well. In composing short autobiographical pieces, she "retraces thoughts, smells, and touches from the past, since doing so usually brings a wealth of other memories along with the initial association." Through the "domino effect of remembrance," she claims even to remember her adoption at three months, the moment when her adoptive mother first held her. Her memories are evocative of the senses ("I remember leaning back against that wind and not being able to fall"), of pride, terror, disillusionment, and love. Through writing sketches such as "One Remembers Most What One Loves," Asiya hopes to "inspire readers with a willingness to embrace and love other cultures as their own."

** One Remembers Most What One Loves

- I have often been commended for my memory. I can even remember being held when I was adopted at three months of age. Perhaps one only recalls events which profoundly change one's life.
- I remember my youth very clearly. How the seasons would change! September would bring its chilly air and a nervous start of a new school year. November would be full of excitement, with its strong gusts of wind and swirling sandstorms. It was amazing to look at a grain of sand and

know that it had come from over two thousand miles away, from the Gobi desert. I remember leaning back against that wind and not being able to fall. I can still see that stream of bicycles going to the city, every head clad with a thin scarf to protect against the sand.

How well I know that bitter coldness of the winter, bringing snowballs and ice-skating on the lake at the Summer Palace. February fireworks, noodles and mooncakes for the New Year, our home always filled with friendly visits. I remember the monsoon rains of April and how the rice fields behind our apartment would sway as if they had a life of their own. And how could I forget the long, hot summers of badminton, evening walks, and mosquito nets?

Perhaps my memory is fostered by the countless nights I spent memorizing Chinese characters, stroke after stroke. In any case, I cannot forget. I love my childhood. I love Beijing.

Bei sha tan nong ji xue yuan. This is the name of the Chinese compound we lived in, an agricultural mechanization institute on the outskirts of Beijing. During the day, my father worked there while I would accompany my mother into the city. My mother taught sociology at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute and I attended its adjoining Chinese elementary school. At age nine, I was in a country I had not lived in since I was a toddler and my Chinese was very poor. Hence, I entered first grade having already had four years of American grade school.

I remember my apprehension when my teacher introduced me on the first day of school. A hush fell over the classroom as forty pairs of wide eyes beheld for the first time a person of African descent. After what seemed a long time, class went on as usual, and finding myself amidst a maze of unintelligible dialogue, I took out my coloring pencils and began to draw. The children around me smiled shyly at me, curious to see what I was drawing. Such was the beginning of enduring friendships.

As the months rolled by, the sea of gibberish slowly became a wealth of vocabulary. I never knew that a language could describe things so precisely—but this is not to be wondered at when one considers the 15,000 characters that comprise the Chinese language, of which one must know at least 3,000 to be literate.

There was a routine common to each day. Upon arriving at school in the morning, everyone assembled in the playground and did the morning exercises. This involved dance-like movements and several laps around the school, rain or shine. Once inside the building we would do a series of mental math computations as quickly as possible. Then everyone would assume the "correct posture" of arms folded behind the back—a posture I found exceedingly uncomfortable at first. This position had to be maintained throughout class except when raising a hand, which was done by putting the right elbow on the desk.

Chinese class would involve reading passages from our textbooks 9 and learning new characters. Breaks between every class would be used to

10

12

13

14

clean the classroom—sprinkling water on the concrete floor to dampen the famous Beijing dust before sweeping, washing the blackboards with wet cloths and neatening up the teacher's desk. One of these breaks was used for everyone to massage their heads while relaxing music wafted down from the announcement speaker attached to the ceiling. In the middle of the day, everybody went home to eat lunch and nap for a few hours, after which classes would continue till four in the afternoon.

After school I would always get a snack while I waited for my mother to pick me up. In the fall there were glazed apple-like fruit which were put on sticks, kebab style. In the winter there were dried, seasoned fish slices, and dried plums. Summer always meant popsicles, peaches and watermelon. I would eat my snack on the way home, watching the city change into the corn and rice fields of our institute.

At first I found the idea of Saturday classes repelling but I soon forgot that I ever had a two-day weekend. Sundays I looked forward to the hour of Disney cartoons in Chinese. Every other weekend I visited a nearby cow farm and helped feed the cows and calves. I remember talking at length with a milkmaid who had never before heard of the African slave trade, and her subsequent wishful disbelief.

I remember the proud feeling of putting on my red scarf for the first time. By then, I had read a lot about Chairman Mao and talked to people about the history of China. I felt a nationalist pride wearing this scarf, as the Little Red Guards had forty years ago in helping to defeat the Japanese militarists. The red scarf meant that one was committed to helping all those in difficulty and I proceeded to do this with great zeal—picking up watermelons for a man whose wheelbarrow wheels had split, helping old people across busy roads, etc.

Third grade brought the advent of the English class. I was inwardly amused by the children's accents but when I corrected them, I was astonished to find that my words differed very little from theirs. In fact, as a grain of desert sand that has traveled many miles is indistinguishable from surrounding indigenous earth, I felt no different from any other Chinese child.

I can still see the faces of shopkeepers who had had their backs turned when I had asked for an item and when they turned around, were astounded to see a little black kid speaking perfect Mandarin. I think I even delighted in shocking people, purposefully going on a raid of the local shops. But I found that people were genuinely touched that I had taken the time to study their difficult language. I was warmly embraced as one of their children.

Fourth grade brought the Tiananmen massacre. Before the shootings, my mother and I had gone every day to visit her students and friends at the square. My heart felt like it was bursting with love, so strong was the feeling of community. There were so many people there that every part of your body was in contact with someone else. Once I

looked triumphantly at my mother and exclaimed, "See? When you're with the people, you can't fall!" I remember drawing an analogy between the people and the November winds I could lean back against. Of course it was also a political statement.

The night of the massacre, I could hear the firing of guns from our home. My mother, who had been in the square at the time, managed to get back safely. The silence the next day pervaded the whole city and the sadness was unbearable. I remember feeling betrayed. How could this happen to my people? For the first time in forty years, the army had gone against its people. The young said that this was what socialism had come to, but the elders, recognizing that this was a form of fascism, muttered softly that this would never have happened under Chairman Mao.

The vision of black marks on the roads made from burning vehicles is engraved in my mind. The pools of blood were quickly washed away, bullet holes patched and death tolls revised. Near our institute there was the distinct scent of decomposing bodies brought from the city. These may have been buried or set fire to—no one knew, no one asked or verified. No one dared to speak, but in everyone was a mixture of anger, anguish and horror.

My parents' following separation accentuated the sadness. I spent months trying to heal our broken family, almost believing that that achievement would heal the outside world as well. Fourth grade ended early and I longed to get away from the sadness. It was at this point that my mother decided to return to the U.S. I dreaded leaving but I anticipated the change of atmosphere. I was in for a surprise.

For more than a year, I experienced culture shock. Everything was familiar but new—the clothes, hairstyles, houses, toilets. People had so many things they never used or took for granted, and yet they considered themselves not to be well-off. I was incensed how little respect my peers had for their parents and elders. How anyone could hear what the teachers were saying when classes were so noisy was beyond me. Everyone seemed arrogant and ignorant of other cultures. Kids wouldn't believe I was American because they thought I "spoke weird." They asked me, "Why can't you talk normal?" I grew tired of explaining. Even African Americans thought I was from elsewhere. The pride I had felt when I represented Black America in China suffered a pang. I was disgusted by the racism against the Orient which I discovered to be rampant. I found myself pining for the comfortable existence I had come from.

Seven years later, I still like to surprise Chinese people with my knowledge of the language when I happen to meet them. I think it is important to show that cultural gaps can be crossed, and without much difficulty as long as there is an open mind. I go back to China when money is available—I visit Beijing and the cow farm, reliving old memories and making new ones. Perhaps one remembers most what one loves.

Content

- 1. If you were to form your understanding of China only from Tschannerl's description, what would your impression of the country be?
- 2. What kind of a character is Tschannerl herself? What details, what incidents does she specifically present (as, for example, "a little black kid speaking perfect Mandarin," ¶ 14)? What else do you infer about her from reading between the lines?
- 3. Why did returning to the United States present such a culture shock (¶ 19) for Tschannerl?

Strategies/Structures/Language

- 4. Throughout the essay (except for the last paragraph) Tschannerl appropriately sticks to her child's perspective. What would she have gained—or lost—if she had incorporated her more adult understanding of the country and the subject?
- 5. The prevailing tone of Tschannerl's recollection of China is one of love. How does she manage to convey this while at the same time acknowledging the harshness of the political climate?
- 6. Tschannerl uses only a single Chinese expression, the name of the compound where her family lived (¶ 5), yet her immersion in China depends on fishing "a wealth of vocabulary" out of "a sea of gibberish" (¶ 7). This technique, of using a small fragment to indicate a much larger picture, delicate as a calligraphed scroll, conveys a wealth of meaning. Find other instances where she has used this technique effectively.

For Writing

- 7. Many of the essays in *The Essay Connection*, such as this one (see also Fadiman, 104–7; White, 97–103; Sanders, 249–59; and Spinner 333–34) rely on the memories of young children for their details, incidents, even interpretations—though the meanings are often enhanced by the adult author's understanding. With a partner, discuss a significant memory of your own. Does s/he find it credible? Coherent? Is any crucial information missing? Based on your discussion, examine Tschannerl's essay and two others of your choice in terms of their credibility, and propose a set of criteria for evaluating the validity of child memories. You may wish to consult celebrated court cases concerning child abuse or Binjamin Wilkomirski's disputed account of his alleged holocaust experiences before the age of five (since indisputable evidence shows that he was living in Switzerland at the time).
- 8. Drawing primarily on your childhood memories, describe a place that is important to you, providing sufficient detail to convey its significance to readers who are unfamiliar with it. Can you rely entirely on your own memory, or do you need to consult other sources? If so, for what kinds of information? You could use E. B. White's "Once More to the Lake" (97–103) as a model of split perception—past and present superimposed on one another.



For comprehension, writing, and research activities and resources, please visit the companion website at <college.hmco.com/english>.

Additional Topics for Writing Description

(For strategies for writing description, see 239-40.)

MULTIPLE STRATEGIES FOR WRITING DESCRIPTION

In writing on any of the description topics below, you can employ a number of options to enable your readers to interpret the subject according to the dimensions you present—those accessible by sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell or in psychological or emotional terms:

- *illustrations* and *examples*, to show the whole, its components, and to interpret them
- photographs, drawings, diagrams, to clarify and explain
- symbolic use of literal details
- a narrative, or logical sequence, to provide coherence of interrelated parts
- definitions, explanations, analyses of the evidence
- an implied argument derived from the evidence and dependent on any of the above techniques
- 1. Places, for readers who haven't been there:
 - a. Your dream house (or room)
 - b. Your favorite spot on earth—or the place from hell
 - c. A ghost town, or a dying or decaying neighborhood
 - d. A foreign city or country you have visited
 - e. A shopping mall or a particular store or restaurant
 - f. A factory, farm, store, or other place where you've worked
 - g. The waiting room of an airport, hospital, physician's or dentist's office, or welfare office
 - h. A mountain, beach, lake, forest, desert, field, or other natural setting you know well
 - Or compare and contrast two places you know well—two churches, houses, restaurants, vacation spots, schools, or any of the places identified in parts a-h, above; or a place before or after a renovation, a natural disaster, a long gap in time

See essays and poetry by E. B. White, 97–103; Lee, 156–64; Shange, 166–71; Yu, 173–82; Oliver, 190; Cagle, 191–95; Zitkala-Sa, 196–202; Twain, 265–71; Hogan, 273–76; Tschannerl, 278–81; Asayesh and Khan, 318–24; Barry, 354–63; Innerarity and Verghese, 365–72; Nocton, 527–31; O'Brien, 543–50; and Tayebi, 554–58.

- 2. People you know for readers who don't know them:
 - a. A close relative or friend
 - b. A friend or relative with whom you were once very close but from whom you are presently separated, physically or psychologically
 - c. An antagonist

- d. Someone with an occupation or skill you want to know more about you may want to interview the person to learn what skills, training, and personal qualities the job or activity requires
- e. Someone who has participated, voluntarily or involuntarily, in a significant historical event
- f. A bizarre or eccentric person, a "character"
- g. A high achiever, mentor or role model, in business, education, sports, the arts or sciences, politics, religion
- A person whose reputation, public or private, has changed dramatically, for better or worse

See essays and poetry by Lamott, 39–40; Kingston, 60–61; Ruffin, 76–82; Pelizzon, 91–92; Alexie, 93–95; White, 97–103; Sanders, 249–59; Lee, 156–64; Cagle, 191–95; McGuire, 225–31; Britt, 261–63; and Spinner, 333–34.

- 3. Situations or events, for readers who weren't there:
 - A holiday, birthday, or community celebration; a high school or college party
 - b. a crucial job interview
 - c. A farmer's market, flea market, garage sale, swap meet, or auction
 - d. An argument, brawl, or fight
 - e. A performance of a play, concert, or athletic event
 - f. A ceremony—a graduation, wedding, christening, bar or bat mitzvah, an initiation, the swearing-in of a public official
 - g. A family or school reunion
 - h. A confrontation—between team members and referees or the coach, strikers and scabs, protesters and police

See essays, poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction by Fadiman, 104–7; Nelson, 132–32; Hall, 242–45; Sedaris, 306–8; Rodriguez, 310–16; Tallent, 388–90; Loomis, 425–29; King, Jr., 444–57; O'Brien, 543–50; Fendrich, 551–53; and Tayebi, 554–58.

- 4. Experiences or feelings, for readers with analogous experiences:
 - a. Love—romantic, familial, patriotic, or religious (see Sanders, 249–59; Rodriguez, 310–16; Spinner, 333–34; Lee, 156–64)
 - b. Isolation or rejection (see Zitkala-Sa, 196–202; Kozol, 204–11; Loomis, 425–59)
 - c. Fear (see Fadiman, 104–7)
 - d. Aspiration (see Douglass, 109-13)
 - e. Success (see McGuire, 225-31)
 - f. Anger (see Douglass, 109–13)
 - g. Peace, contentment, or happiness (see White, 97–103)
 - h. An encounter with birth or death (see Lee, 156–64)
 - i. Coping with a handicap or disability—yours or that of someone close to you (see Lamott, 39–40; Sanders, 249–59)
 - j. Knowledge and understanding—but after the fact (Fadiman, 104–7; Sanders, 249–59)
 - k. Being a stranger in a strange land, as a traveler, immigrant, minority, or displaced person (Cagle, 191–95; Asayesh, 318–20; Khan, 321–24)