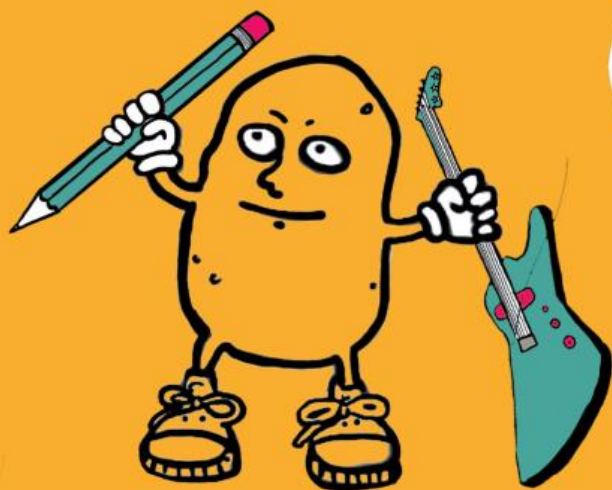


"The antidote to both imposter syndrome and the bullshit of every gatekeeper you've ever met."

—Ariel Gore, author of *How to Become a Famous Writer Before You're Dead*

CREATIVE, NOT FAMOUS ACTIVITY BOOK



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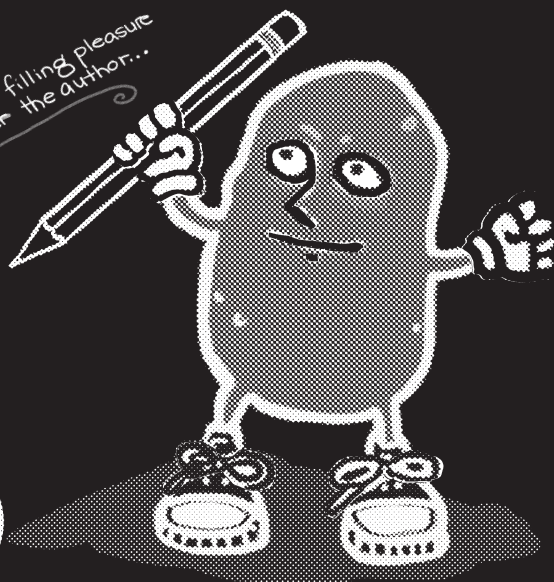
AN INTERACTIVE IDEA GENERATOR
FOR SMALL POTATOES & OTHERS
WHO WANT TO GET THEIR AYUSS IN GEAR

AYUN HALLIDAY

CREATIVE NOT FAMOUS ACTIVITY BOOK

AN INTERACTIVE IDEA GENERATOR
FOR SMALL POTATOES & OTHERS
WHO WANT TO GET THEIR AYUSS IN GEAR

← Negative space for your filling pleasure
compliments of the printer the author...



AYUN HALLIDAY



MICROCOSM PUBLISHING
PORTLAND, ORE & CLEVELAND, OHIO

*Creative, Not Famous Activity Book: An Interactive Idea Generator For
Small Potatoes & Others Who Want to Get Their Ayuss in Gear*

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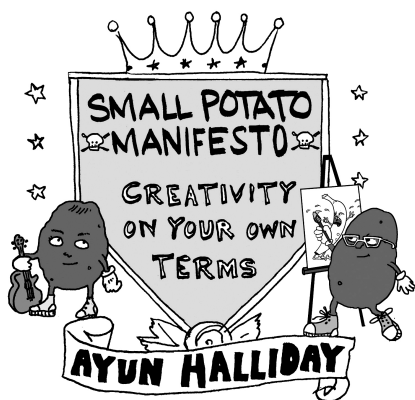
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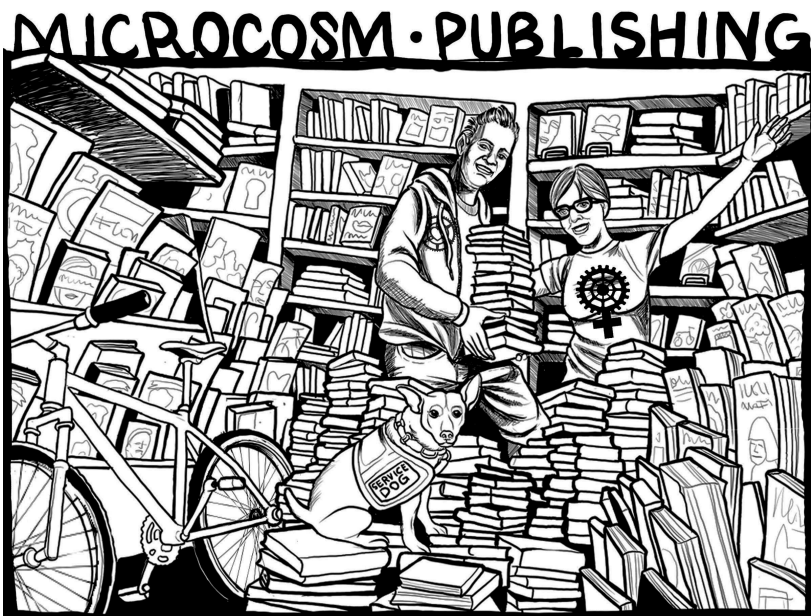
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Love this book? Check out its wordier companion, *Creative, Not Famous: The Small Potato Manifesto*.



About the Publisher

MICROCOSM PUBLISHING is Portland's most diversified publishing house and distributor with a focus on the colorful, authentic, and empowering. Our books and zines have put your power in your hands since 1996, equipping readers to make positive changes in their lives and in the world around them. Microcosm emphasizes skill-building, showing hidden histories, and fostering creativity through challenging conventional publishing wisdom with books and bookettes about DIY skills, food, bicycling, gender, self-care, and social justice. What was once a distro and record label started by Joe Biel in a drafty bedroom was determined to be *Publisher's Weekly's* fastest growing publisher of 2022 and has become among the oldest independent publishing houses in Portland, OR and Cleveland, OH. We are a politically moderate, centrist publisher in a world that has inched to the right for the past 80 years.

Global labor conditions are bad, and our roots in industrial Cleveland in the 70s and 80s made us appreciate the need to treat workers right. Therefore, our books are **MADE IN THE USA**

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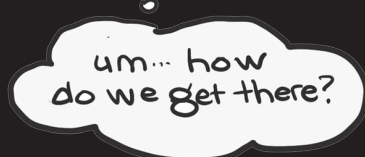
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INTRODUCTION

Believe it or not, not everyone looking to amp up their creative output and shake things loose when they're feeling stuck or bored turns to a *book*.

Not when the internet abounds with creativity experts offering a free taste of their performance-enhancing systems, in return for which, they get to spam your inbox multiple times a day with reasons why you should sign up for a paid membership.

I can only guess you have some lingering loyalty toward paper (or the person who gave you this book as a gift thinks you do, anyway.)

I'm a paper loyalist myself. It reminds me of the happiest, most engaged moments of my childhood. I also like beans, macaroni, the camera app on my fast-aging cell phone, costumes, old books and magazines, dollar store impulse purchases, my laptop, and social media. You'll be using them all should you choose to do every assignment in this book, not that that's mandatory.

I'm not some all-seeing prophet of your creative path. I am but a small potato who's spent her life making art of one kind or another, and endeavoring to share it with such interested parties as I can manage to truffle up.

Which is to say, I'm not famous, and most of my creative work is self-generated. Not too long ago, I interviewed several dozen other veteran small potatoes about how and why they continue to make their art, how they promote and preserve it, the specifics of their practice, the highs, the lows, and all the absurdities of the office. This became a book, *Creative, Not Famous: The Small Potato Manifesto*.

Without knowing if you've read or even heard of this book prior to the preceding sentence, I'm going to guess you're a small potato too.

Please don't take umbrage. It's nothing to be ashamed of! Most of us are small potatoes! History decrees that few big bananas can remain so for all eternity, or even a generation.

I'm proud to be a gritty, tough, little, weird-shaped potato. Our culture force feeds us the notion that fame's the thing to chase after, but I'd far rather sail toward Valhalla in a ship laden with my creative output—things I had fun making, that captured something immediate about my lived experience, that pulled my head out of the digital realm for hours at a time, and forged a community of nifty fellow artists and a few very supportive, admiring civilians who are always saying they don't know *where* we get our ideas from.

Tell them: here. You get your ideas here.

(We promise not to revoke your membership if your execution of one of those ideas makes you famous beyond your wildest dreams. But we probably won't support your Patreon.)

Have fun.

Q. Hameed ♥

Interview

Hey, big shot. Can we start with an interview?

Don't stress, it's not for publication. No one's going to edit your answers, or take them out of context.

Think of this exercise how you will... taking stock, declaring your intentions, settling the score.

Maybe one of the questions will spark something in you. I look forward to hearing the resulting song, or reading that comic. Should you wind up choreographing something in response, and require non-dancers to film themselves performing it from afar, I volunteer as tribute.

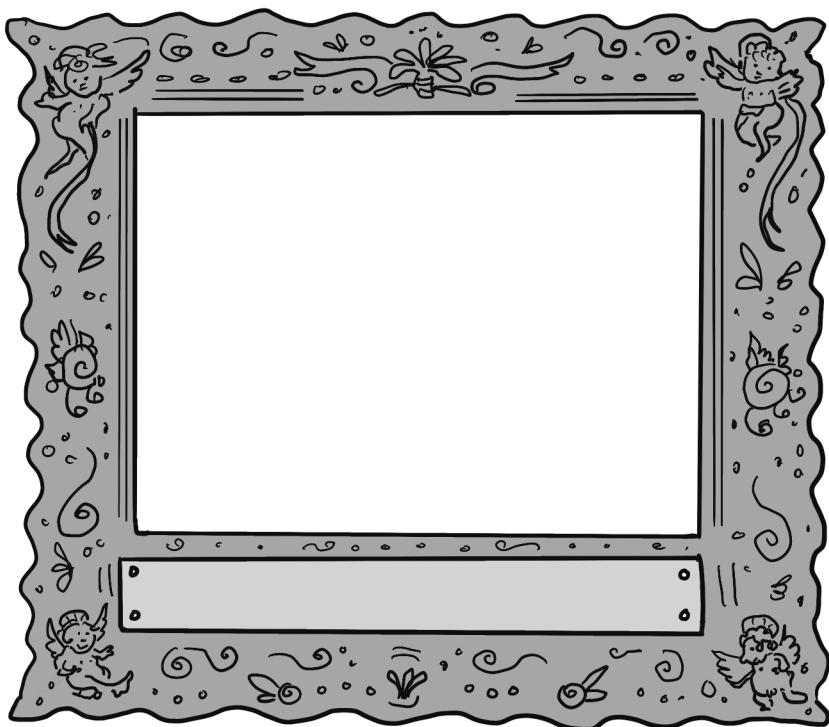
To get you comfortable defacing these pristine pages, here's an ornate frame in which to draw a fucked up clown.



Don't make a perceived shortfall of skill in the arena of the visual arts make you think you can't. Put quotation marks around the word draw in the previous paragraph if that takes some of the pressure off. "Draw" that clown.

I understand that you might have other hesitations. If you were ever punished for scribbling in a book, if anyone violated the unspoken privacy of your journal, make that clown extra fucked up! If you're worried that this is going to devolve into self-help, and self-help fills you with rage, throw the book at the wall, then pick it back up, and invest that clown with everything you're feeling.

Did you notice the museum plate at the bottom of the frame? Don't leave it blank. Every masterpiece needs a title.



Good. Let's proceed. Depending on the size of your handwriting, you may find that you need more space than you've been allotted to answer any given question. If so, jot a few words, put a star next to that question, move on and double back later with whatever legal pad or laptop you favor for longform explorations.

Enough prologue! Time to jump in for real.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

How did your upbringing influence your creativity?

What crucial lesson has life taught you?

What stresses you out?

Who do you admire?

Who are you jealous of?

What would you like to hold forth on without interruption?

What would you like to learn?

Where are you in relation to your current project?

What subject would you like to explore in your creative work?

How does the place where you live influence your creativity?

What was the most creative period of your life?

What gets you creatively turned on?

What piece of art (in any genre) moved you at an early age?

What piece of art moved you recently?

more!! →

What controversial opinion are you afraid to express?

What's something you wish was more popular?

What's something you wish was less popular?

What is your latest obsession?

What weakness is your secret strength?

What would you like to let go of?

What do you wish you hadn't quit?

What did you envision success would look like when you were just starting out?

What do you wish you had known earlier?

What goals do you have for the immediate future?

What goals do you seek to accomplish before you die?

What goals are you unlikely to achieve and are you at peace with that?

How do you revive your flagging mojo?

even more!! →

Who encourages you?

Who discourages you?

What's the most encouraging thing ever said to or about you and/or your work?

If a genie offered to grant one wish to make life easier, what would you wish for?

What do you do well?

What are you vain about?

What embarrasses you?

What worries you?

In what ways are you misunderstood?

How would you like to be remembered?

If you could contribute just one thing to a time capsule to represent your creative existence, what would it be?

What question(s) did I fail to ask?



MULCH

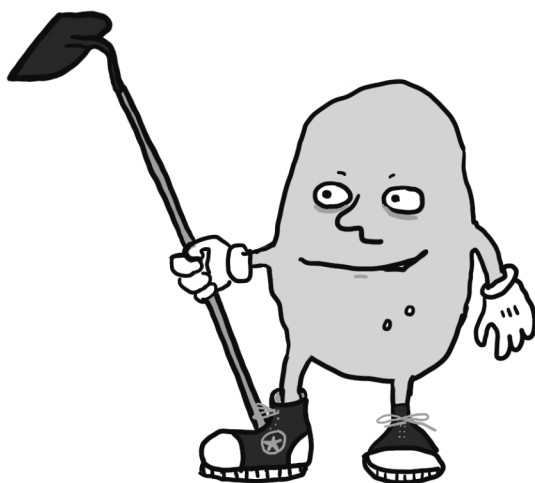
This section's exercises are intended to feel fun...

They may also feel a bit childish, frivolous, and/or bizarre.

Think of it as shoveling several tons of zoo animal dung onto an underutilized vacant lot.

It's mulch. Beautiful things will start springing up through the cracked concrete.

It may not blossom into a full-bore community garden, but you'll definitely get some tasty weeds.



Snake Oil

Big bananas have one thing going for them. Assistants! Which could just as well be spelled assistance.

There are many things I could use a little assistance with.

Time management, obviously.

Seems like that would be easier were I relieved of all this infernal laundry, grocery shopping, food preparation...not to mention a whole host of sandwich generation issues.

With no hope of an assistant, my thoughts turn to snake oil. Miracle products. A lavender-scented time management spray that actually repairs the ozone.

If that's not a possibility, then some inexpensive solution that would resolve the permanent grunge off my stovetop, after which it would stay clean forever with zero effort on my part. A household version of Erica Jong's "zipless fuck."

As a small potato who dreams of travel, I'd be much obliged if this solution could also help me secure rock bottom fares without any research or angst.

What would you like assistance with? Don't be shy. Be greedy. Vain. Ridiculous, even.

Jot 10 of those things below.

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

Great. Now, write 3 products you've purchased recently, or purchase regularly, that come in a squirt bottle, a spray bottle, a squeeze bottle, or powdered form.

1. 2. 3.	
----------------	--

Good! Pick one of those products and imagine that renaming it will empower it to do all the things you listed earlier ...and much, much more!

Names are important, so give yourself some choices. How about five punchy, one word names:

1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	
----------------------------	--

And three old-timey, handlebar mustache, sideshow barker type names.

1. 2. 3.	
----------------	--

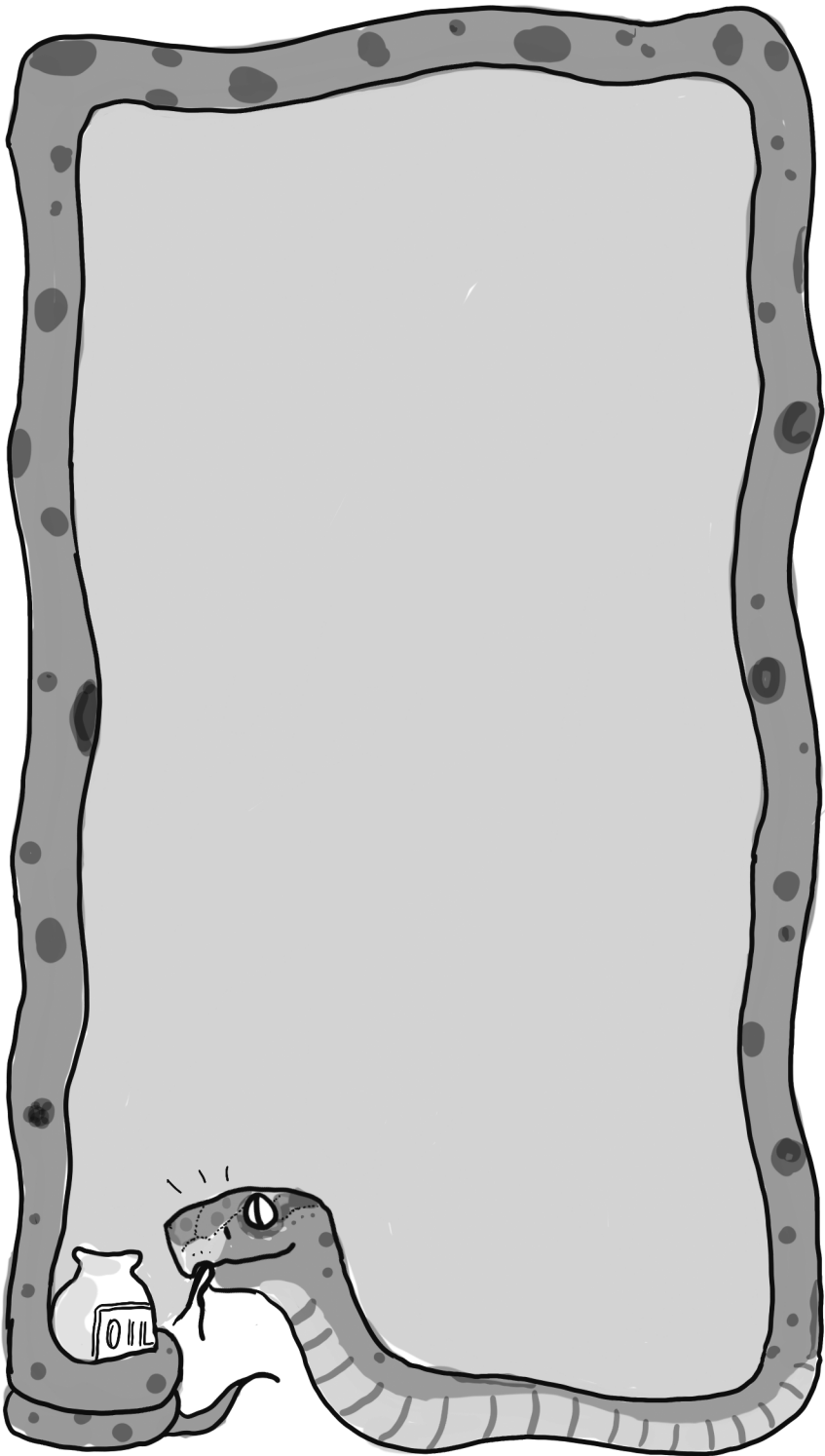
Circle the one that makes you laugh.

Now we must alert the public to this miracle product's many virtues. Use the space below to come up a jingle or create a full page handbill extolling its unbelievable properties.

There's a sucker born every minute, so go hard! Reel 'em in.



If you need inspiration, listen to Tom Waits' "Step Right Up" or "Pirelli's Miracle Elixir" from *Sweeney Todd*.



Sing It Wrong

One of the last things I did before the pandemic brought everything to a screeching halt was take Jonathan Stancato's Sing a Secret workshop. I had a hang up about singing in public, compliments of my high school music teacher, and was hoping this workshop could help me wriggle out from under that.

Mission accomplished! In *Creative, Not Famous* I described how the experience often felt closer to what group therapy must be like at its best:

... folks who just met, rolling around on the floor with their eyes closed, grunting, yowling, breaking into tears & uncontrollable laughter. We also managed to get some singing in.

One of my favorite exercises involved picking a song I knew well and singing the right lyrics on deliberately wrong notes.

Try it. Mary Had a Little Lamb. Go!

Fun, right? Now pick a song you love. The kind of gripping, emotional number you would have belted into your hairbrush as an unselfconscious child, but are now too inhibited to try. Go with your gut and write the title below:

(Gifted musicians, you're not off the hook here. You also stand to benefit from this exercise.)

Sing that song. Give it your all—right lyrics, wrong notes.

Don't try to be funny. If you need to clear the room to relieve yourself of shyness or the impulse to entertain, do it.



If it helps to have a “microphone,” grab a wooden spoon.

Don’t bag out early. Sing that song all the way through to the end. Fudge the lyrics if your memory gives out on you. Go.

Wunderbar. How did *that* feel?



Mmm. Now, take some deep, calming breaths, then sing the song through again, respecting the original melody as much as possible.

What did you notice?



This exercise shakes something loose. Deliberate attempts to make a bad drawing or an awful piece of writing can be amusing, but something about singing established notes so empirically, horribly wrong unleashes a far richer vein of creativity.

Bust this one out whenever the ol’ inner critic gets the upper hand, impeding your progress and making you feel like a talentless boob.



From Jonathan: Go to a private karaoke room all by yourself. Sing your heart out for an hour.

Pippi Hole

I can't pass a hollow tree without thinking of Pippi Longstocking.

Remember how she stashed a coral necklace and a leather bound notebook with a tiny silver pencil in a hollow tree for the kids next door to find?

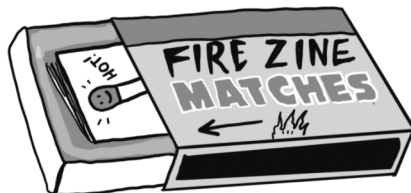
When I was a kid, that's what really grabbed me about those books—not the horse on Pippi's porch, her emancipated state, or her seemingly limitless capacity for chaos.

Are there hollow trees where you live? Niches in brick walls? Drawers in furniture showrooms? The world is full of unintentional, overlooked hidey holes. Brainstorm some goodly spots then write their locations below.



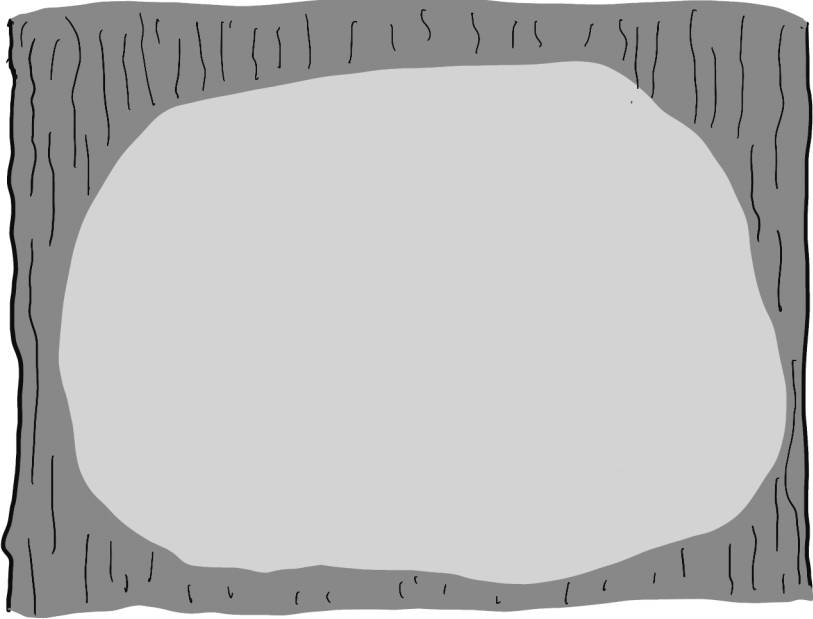
Don't stress if none sprang to mind. Do what Pippi would do! Take a walk around the neighborhood, eyes peeled for likely spots. You'll find some. Sneak back to fill them with small gifts.

No, not diamonds. Something MORE valuable:



Here is a hollowed-out tree trunk, ready to receive your ideas of things you would be bedazzled to stumble upon as an unsuspecting member of the general public.

(It pains me to say it, but steer clear of sweets. Any finder who's not a child will assume they're loaded with razor blades, and any finder who's not an adult will be distressed to see such bounty being deposited in the trash before they can wrap their tongue around it.)



Oh lordy, I just thought of something. Those Swedish had no compunction about helping themselves to the treasures in Pippi's tree, but whoever finds your gift may feel a bit bashful or guilty about taking it.

So leave a note asserting that it's okay. Think of the note as an extension of the present. Practice writing it below. Sign your name in such a way as to preserve your anonymity.

Dear Friend,

Yours Truly,

Screen Saver Therapy



PALATE
CLEANSER!

I am pretty enamored of my screensavers, a curated collection of visual funnies truffled up from the Internet that kicks in whenever I wander away from my computer for more than 2 minutes.

They're surprisingly good medicine for something so passively repetitive.

I know some people are heartened by loading their screensavers with positive affirmations or photos of their kids, but I prefer my Instagram pal @digitalmeddle's altered children's book cover, featuring a jacked up bear in red suspender pants under the legend "Fucking Shit Up on Bath Salts."

I smile every time it cycles to the front.

Ditto a panel swiped from Ally Brosh's great webcomic, *Hyperbole and a Half*, in which a happy lizard strides out of a bog and up onto a bank, telling the gaping mouthed creature in its wake, "Not today! I've got LEGS, motherfucker!" That one makes me feel wily as Anansi, like I've got legs too.

I've also got one in which Jesus shoos away a Brontosaurus. ("You're fucking up my story, you big brown cunt.")

I'm sure some people in the cafes or library where I work have been offended by what my laptop turns into when it goes to sleep, but guess what? My screensaver parade is not for them! It's an amusement park ride I built for myself, one I never weary of riding. It releases endorphins. I'm as surprised as anyone, but I'm not going to question something that works so well, for free.

And unlike tattoos, carefully hung artwork, or collaborators who no longer serve the common goal, it's a cinch to jettison the ones that no longer do it for me.

If you're feeling like the world misapprehends you, program your screensavers to suggest otherwise.

Thesaurus Expansion Pack

Care to guess how many words I've got for snow?

One.

But I have lots of synonyms for vagina. My favorite is one a Caribbean labor and delivery nurse introduced me to while instructing me as to the placement of a fresh-from-the-freezer belted sanitary napkin she brought me shortly after the birth of my first child.

BUKILUKI ♡♡

That's one I've actually incorporated into my vocabulary. Others are more like treasured artifacts comprising an ever-growing linguistic collection. Living history, baby!

What's something you have a lot of words for? (It doesn't have to be a reproductive organ....) Write it here:

Use the space below to document as many existing synonyms as you can cram in there, including ones you made up yourself. (Those are the best kind!)

My goodness, what a big collection you have, Grandma!

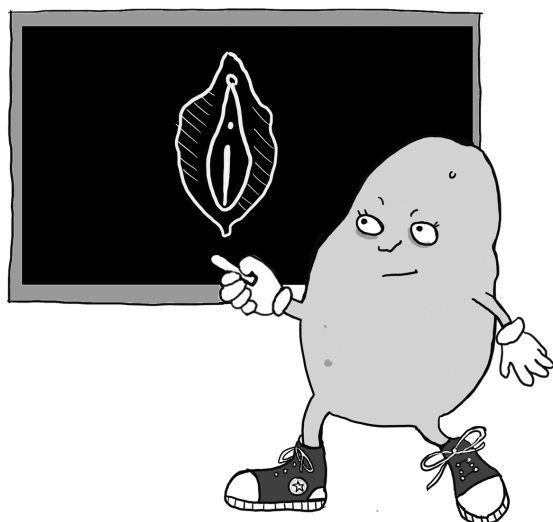
There's still room to grow, though. Without stopping to think, make up at least 10 more.

If you're stuck, give some thought to the item's shape and color. Connect it to a historical figure, make it possessive, and add "folly." Detour into the surreal. Don't stop til you've got 10.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Now what?

For starters, you could circle your favorite and notify the good people at Roget's in advance of their next update.



Childhood Gems

I'm gonna venture out onto a limb and guess that you were a pretty creative kid.

I was. Also tragically unathletic, though my coordination and stamina improved once I aged out of the tyranny of gym class and team sports. Creativity was a refuge I happily sought. I found fulfillment in projects, what writer and 90s zine queen Pagan Kennedy describes as the “absorbed, tongue-between-the-teeth, little girl feeling” that is the “essence of art.”

It didn't much matter whether I was banging out ashtrays and placemats at camp, collaging a wallpaper sample book with furniture cut from magazines and the Sunday supplement, collaring the neighborhood kids for plays staged in the shadow of the swing set, drawing comics on cheap paper, or straining credulity with a first-person story about a preteen supermodel who was generous, loyal, smart, popular and above all, modest.

It was all worthwhile.

The only creative endeavor that didn't grab me were the piano lessons my father foisted on me, thinking how civilized it would be to come home from work and nurse a glass of scotch in an armchair while his daughter diligently practiced nearby. (Fooled him!)

Clearly, self-direction was the secret ingredient.

Now it's your turn. List 20 self-directed creative projects from your youth. Don't pause to deliberate over their relative merits. This is an unranked exercise. If you remember doing them, they're in.



if you hit 20 and keep going. I know you know how to scribble up and around a margin!

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(17 more to go. TURN THAT PAGE!) →

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

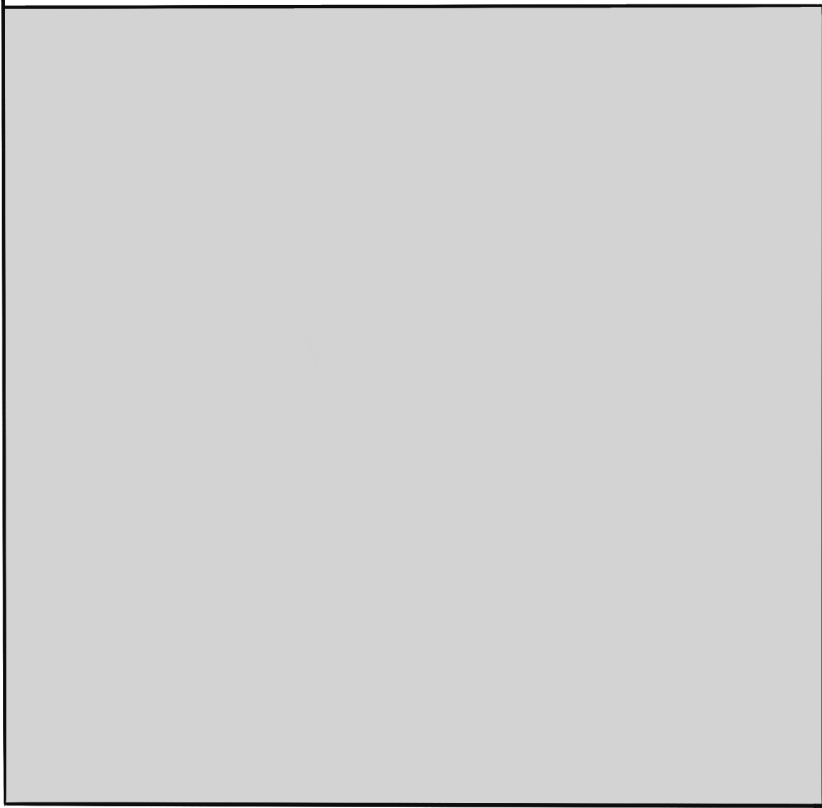
20.

Holy cow, what a list!

It's like dehydrated sourdough starter. Dissolve it in some ordinary tap water, and watch it fizz back to action. Mix some into the projects you're working on now and see how high they rise.

For now, circle a number and recount that project's origin story in the narrative genre of your choice.

Use the rest of this page to jot down everything you remember about the time when you were actively working on that project. What season was it? What were your clothes like? What was going on in your life?



Duplicate that project using different materials. (Or the same materials. We know you're willing to consider the creative potential of macaroni and dried beans.)

I Spy

Pick a color:

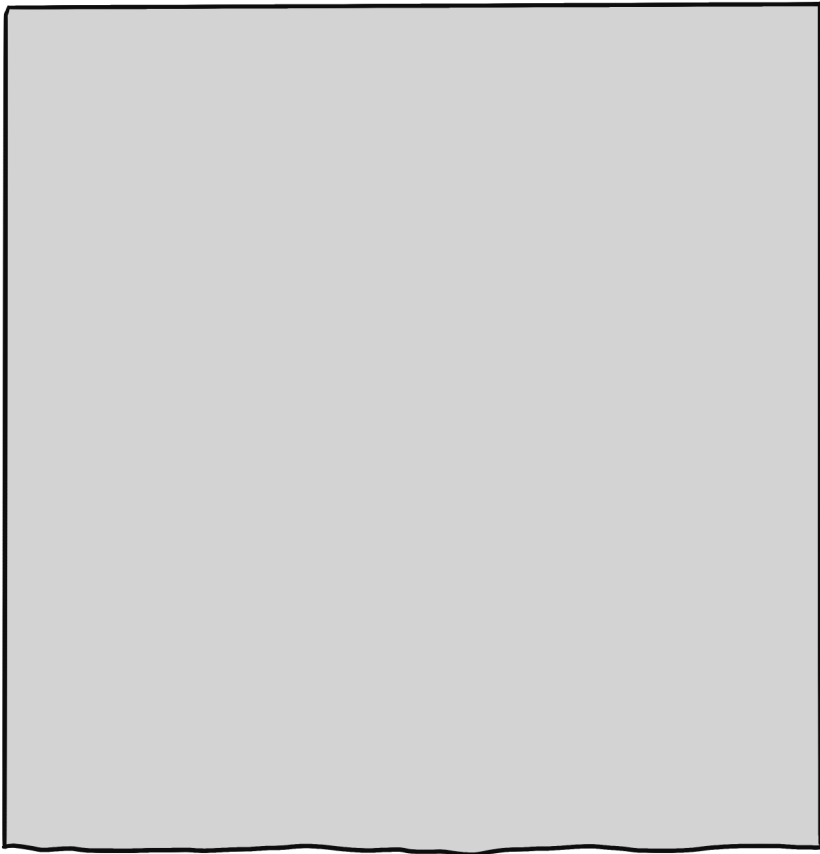
Pick a letter:

Go to another room, or a new location.

Use the space below to document everything you see that is that color or that letter.

Circle anything that satisfies both requirements.

Reward all circled items with more ornate documentation in the form of photos, drawings, haiku...



Pollinating



I love libraries and museums. They were the playing fields of my unathletic, artsy only childhood. As an adult, my visits became more goal-oriented. There were specific titles and exhibits to check out.

I'm nostalgic for the dizzying buzz of those aimless youthful visits, when I foraged without agenda or expectations. Maybe you know what I'm talking about.

Take an afternoon off to hit the library or museum. Go alone so you can wander at will—no need to conform to the biases and whims of another. Bring a notebook and your phone or preferred camera device.

Your assignment is to pollinate. Rather than engaging deeply with any one subject, creator, or work, flit from flower to flower. Treat the curator's cards or book jackets as an incredible free buffet. Sample promiscuously. Don't fill up on anything you're not in the mood for.

Copy down anything that grabs you into your notebook. No need to justify why it grabs you or hatch a plan. Just let yourself be grabbed.

Maybe a title's alliteration is music to your ears. Maybe you're blown away by the existence of an object accurately, miraculously described as "Jade Pillow in the shape of an infant boy."

Maybe it's about color. Or the year a particular work was made.

Maybe something you run across will strike you as the most profound and beautiful combination of words and/or images you have ever encountered. Write it down so you can return to it when you're not in that fugue state that takes over when we are happily bobbing in the vast sea of expectation-free inspiration. Cover your heiner by taking note of Dewey decimal or gallery numbers so you can find your way back at a later date.

Supplement with phone snaps, if you like, but don't discount the creative alchemy of copying these things down in a notebook or the very next page of this book. Preserve that little notebook, and certainly this book, forever. Your efforts are guaranteed to transform it into a veritable seed catalog of ideas. These seeds have no expiration date. Plant them in the soil of your choice and see what takes root.


If you are a reluctant writer, treat yourself a "special" pen. It will make the experience more palatable. I'm partial to a certain low budget fountain pen that costs about five bucks and comes preloaded with purple ink.


Your grade is not dependent on your penmanship or spelling. In fact there are no grades. Only seeds and pollen, gardeners, beekeepers, and prime sources of honey.

Pollination Notes

DATE

LOCATION





Seeing with Your Mind's Eye

As further proof of just how much I love libraries, the branch library where I spent so many happy hours as a kid is the sole setting of my next book—a dystopia administered by illiterate, feral children. (Pardon the stealth promotion. I'm playing the long game with a budget of zero.)

My supple young brain took in thousands of images before graduating to the adult section. Those of a heavy-duty nature had the most staying power.



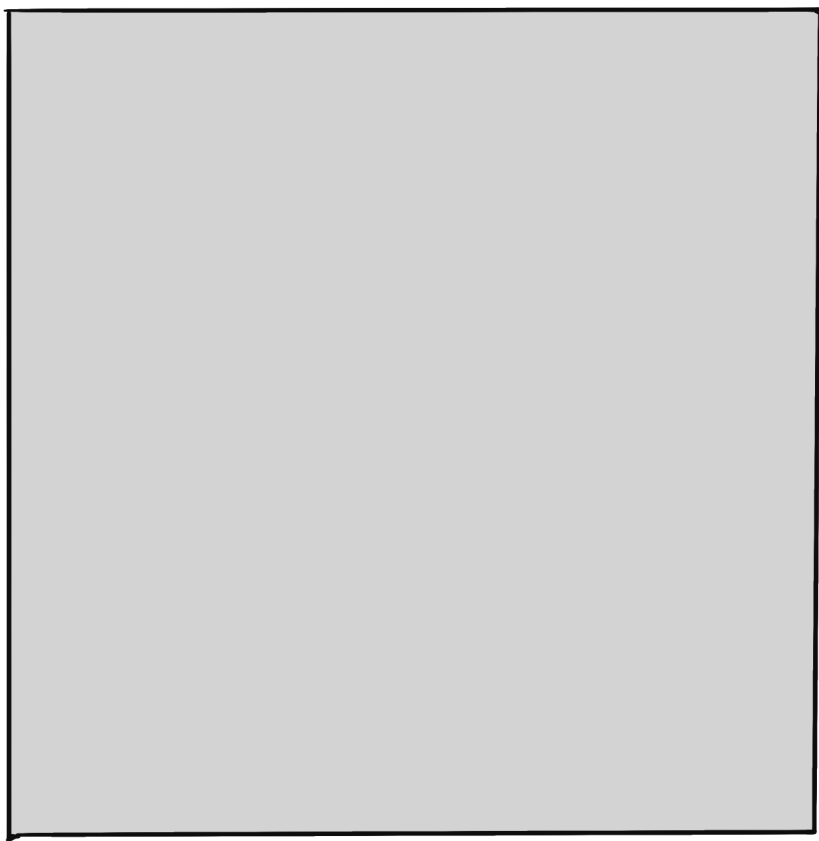
I could go on, but I bet you'd rather start compiling a list of images *you* remember from similar such expeditions.

If you hated books, or didn't get much me-time in the library, list images that wormed their way into your psyche on long ago trips to the dimestore or museum. If sitting at home watching TV was the defining activity of your childhood, document potent scenes from cartoons and commercials.



What's this? What do you think? Keep going. Though maybe downshift into images drawn from life. Those pom pom hats all the boys wore. The orange gumdrops Mrs. Morse handed out for exceptional work. A half-squashed crinkle cut fry on the floor of the cafeteria. This is activating multiple senses.

What have you got?



Now what?

Gee, I dunno. You could go to an improv show, and shout one of 'em out when one of the players calls for audience suggestions. See what somebody else does with it.

I think I'm more interested in finding what you will do with it. Which could be anything. Let it take you by the hand. See where it leads.

Homemade Porn

Keep your clothes on, it's not what you think.

Or hell, take em off... welcome the Muse in the suit you were born wearing.

Let's begin with a bit of art history.

In the realm of Mail Art, the late Ray Johnson was an extremely big banana. Mail Art is a pretty underground phenom, though, so flip the spy glass, and you're looking at a small potato. His creative output was prodigious—photocopied, rubber stamped, painted on driftwood, whatever. This is good news for biographers and documentarians. Ray Johnson left behind a lot of Ray Johnson.

What has this to do with homemade porn, you ask?

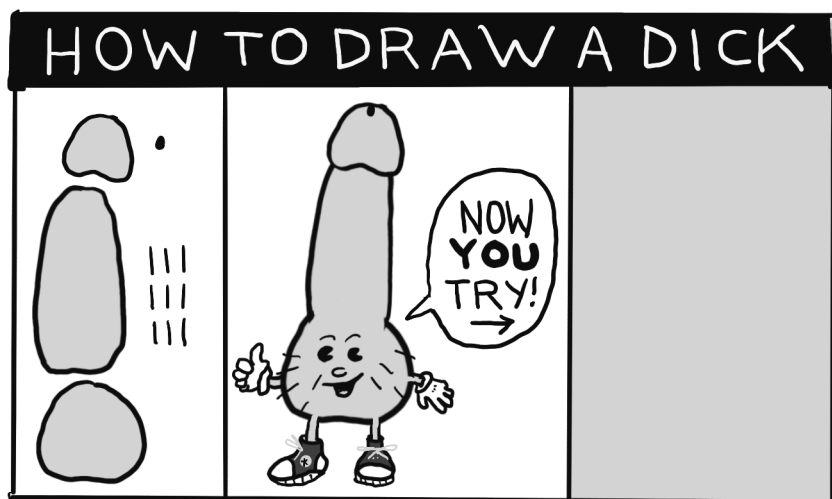
Well, leafing through an expensive and extremely girthy posthumously published compendium of his work, I was surprised to find myself most excited by the dumbest things in it—magazine ads and catalog photos he'd embellished with crudely drawn penises.

We can get so bunched in our quest to get things right—the perfect word, the perfect perspective, the perfect combination of notes . . . we make creativity feel like work. Which it is, to be sure, but it won't feel like that if you leaven it with regular anarchy breaks.

If you've been casting around for an excuse to invest in a fresh black Sharpie, this is it. You'll also need a magazine or catalog. Choose wisely so you don't feel like an asshole or a creep. Stick to something innocuous and unsexy. Try a title aimed at golfers or fly fishing enthusiasts.

The point is not to belittle or humiliate the models' likenesses. It's to blow off steam doing something that would've gotten you in trouble with teacher back in the day...

Don't worry about your drawing abilities. We've had our art history lesson. Now it's time for our art lesson. Rearrange the components at left into a dick:



Very good! I'd recognize that thing anywhere!

Magazine Dream

This one's like homemade porn without the dicks, so don't let go of your Sharpie just yet.

Uh, you're gonna want a fresh magazine, however. One you're not planning to read at a later date. Make it one with lots of full page pictures—ads, editorial, doesn't matter. An old wall calendar would also work.

I should warn you that this exercise asks a lot of your eyeballs. Don't worry. It'll feel good, but if you don't want to be flicking back and forth between the instructions and the task at hand, get a friend to read the steps aloud to you, while you concentrate on performing the actions. No friend, no problem. Flick away. No one will die.

1. Flip open the magazine to a page with a picture, then slam your eyes shut.

2. Create a strobe effect by rapidly flickering your eyelids while rolling your eyeballs around—up, down, side to side, everywhere but toward the picture. I repeat, do not look at the picture. (Feels nice, right? Nothing like giving the ol' eyestalks a vigorous wringing.)

3. After 20 seconds or so of the strobe effect, allow your eyelids to drift back down to a rest. Rub your hands together, and cup them over your eye sockets. (This is an old massage therapy trick. You're welcome.)

4. After you've enjoyed that sensation, allow your eyelids to drift part way open. Aim for half-mast. Gaze at the picture through heavy-lidded, relaxed, post-yoga class eyes.

5. Use the Sharpie to write whatever words and phrases come to mind. Write directly onto the page containing the picture.

Write on limbs and foreheads or hug the outlines of the central image. Doodle, if so inclined. (Here's hoping you got your dicks out on the previous page...) Vary the size and shape of your letters. No need to be clever, or even coherent. Just see what comes up.

Date the page in the upper right corner. Then do it again . . . today, tomorrow, whenever your eyes are tired, your brain's slow to get with the program, or you're paralyzed by self-criticism.

Make it a practice, if you like. This sort of work is disposable, but that doesn't mean you should dispose of it. Archive your altered pages in a manila folder.

If you're itching to do more with them, sign them with a pseudonym and post them in a regular spot, as a service to tired commuters, or save them up until you have enough to repackage as a zine.

Fortune Cookie

Is it just me, or have fortune cookies lost some of their luster?

Not the cookies themselves. You won't catch me bitching about a complimentary combination of egg whites, vanilla and sugar. I'm talking about the little slips of paper contained therein. Seems like they've devolved into common sense advice and one-size-fits-all aphorisms.

You can spice things up by tacking "in bed" to the end, but given your creative powers, surely we can set our sights a bit higher than that.

For this exercise, you must choose a narrative song, book, movie, play or painting, whose story and central character are well known to you.

Write the title and your favorite character here:

Now, serve that character some scallion pancakes and a plate of General Tso's Tofu, to prime their pump for the custom fortune cookies you'll be dumping on them at meal's end.

Think about this character in the context of their world, then take a crack at completing these prompts. You know what the future holds for this character, allowing you to be both preternaturally accurate and a bit mysterious, in keeping with the milieu:

You will soon be receiving

In matters of the heart, _____

The past is _____

Dreams are _____

It is only through _____ that we _____

A fool who _____ is _____

Beware the _____ for _____

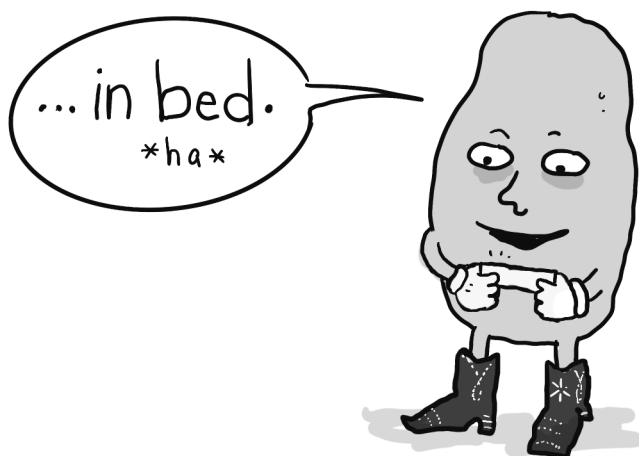
Those who cannot _____ will surely _____

Those who pursue _____ are _____

Pick three to tweak. Make 'em nice and profound.

Could a well-timed fortune cookie have altered the trajectory of *Madame Bovary*?

Unlikely, but it could lay the groundwork for a bang up comic or song in which she swings by a Chinese restaurant on her way to the train tracks.



Memory Palace Cartography

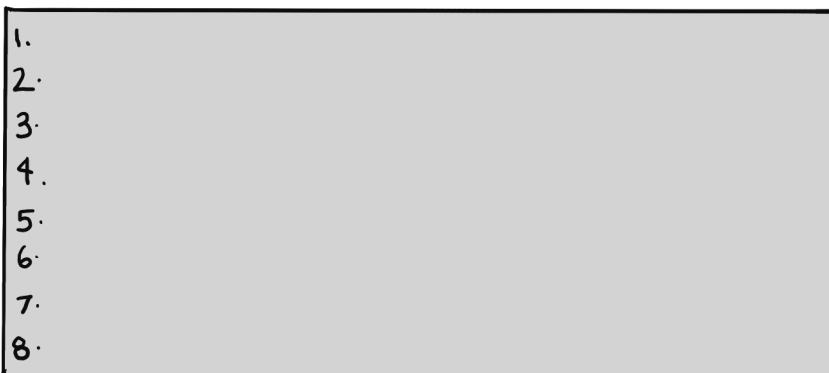
Think about a place you knew well as a child. A place you're unlikely to return to. A place you knew far better than your parents or grandparents did.

Your best friend's home... A cabin at camp... Your favorite store... Your second grade classroom... Something in that vein.

Write it below.



Close your eyes and take yourself on a mental walkthrough of this location. You are the only person who will be present for this tour. Take as much time as you need to give it a thorough investigation. Allow yourself to remember. Notice all the little details. sa
When you've completed your tour, open your eyes (duh) and list 8 things you saw or touched.



- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Use the next page to create a bird's eye view map of this location.

Begin by sketching in the 8 features you listed above.

Position them in correct relation to each other, but don't get overly fussed about draftsmanship. (If you find the term draftsmanship objectionable, cross it out and write your preferred term in the margin. Not that you need my permission...)

Once you've sketched in your eight features, label them.

Add more features. Label them too.

Add a compass rose or any other cartographic flourishes that please you. (A scowling sea monster in the corner is always a classy look.)

Be sure to name your map in the space provided, fix it in time, and take credit.

A hand-drawn map template. The title area at the top left contains the text "A MAP of" followed by a horizontal line, and "circa" followed by a horizontal line. To the right of these lines is a horizontal line, and below that is a horizontal line followed by a comma and the word "cartographer". The rest of the template is a large, empty rectangular space for drawing the map.

Hot Lips

The playwright Lucas Hnath arranged for a friend to interview his mother about a harrowing episode in her past. From this, he created a script that requires an actress to lip sync his mother’s side of the recorded interview, including every verbal tic, cough, and “y’know.” A 75 minute tour de force for any performer with an aging brain!

Dickie Beau, a Brit who describes himself as a “shape-shifter, shirt-lifter, and sometimes scribe,” put together an astonishing hour long performance in which he lip syncs a host of famous actors who’ve been recorded playing Hamlet over the years, as well as interviews in which they discuss each other’s Hamlets. It’s dishy as hell, and far more moving than I expected it to be.

Prior to former New York Governor Andy Cuomo’s fall from grace, a 28-year-old comedian named Maria DeCotis made some pandemic hay by throwing on a tie to lip sync some choice excerpts of his highly digressive daily pandemic briefings.

Lip syncing someone else’s idiosyncratic speech hones your ear, sharpens your powers of observation and gets you out of your own head for a bit.

I bet there are some people in your life who express themselves in ways distinctive enough to make them excellent lip syncing fodder. Inscribe their names below:

1.	
2.	
3.	

Put a star next to their name if you possess a recording of them speaking—a voice mail or a home video...

Put a star next to their name if they’re a different gender or age than you.

Put a star next to their name if they’re dead.

The one with the most stars is a good one to start with.

If you're drawing a blank, or come from inexpressive stock, hit the internet in search of likelier quarry.

Your search is only as good as your search phrase. Customize the ones below with a subject, historic event, or occupation that is of interest to you, then add two of your own devising.

1. Eyewitness account of _____
2. Radio interview w/a _____
3. How to _____
4. _____
5. _____

Plug those into the internet. Anything juicy turn up in the “videos” tab? Good! Download it, secure in the knowledge that you won’t be sued. If anyone asks, you’re using it for “parody.”

Listen to the recording over and over, while doing other tasks, until you know it so well, you can “sing along” with it. Practice practice practice. Get to Carnegie Hall.

Then record yourself lip syncing.



Find a two-way conversation and invite a similarly dedicated friend to join you in this conversation. Or perform both “roles” yourself. A solo duet!

Caveat Emptor

If you've ever used a classified ad to sublet your apartment or sell something you no longer want, you know about emphasizing the positives . . . and leaving out the negatives.

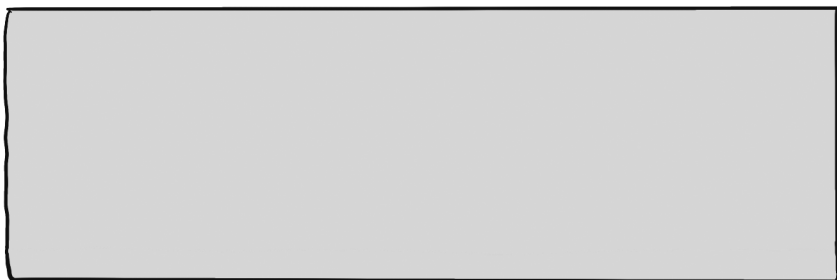
What if people were more frank in their descriptions?

Hop on eBay, Airbnb, or a pet adoption website, and browse until you find something that seems as if it might not be exactly as described. (Set a timer so you don't go down the rabbit hole.)

What did you choose? Copy the item's heading exactly as you found it on the site. Include the price.



Copy the item's description below. If there's not enough space, the major highlights will do.



Circle anything that seems way too good to be true. Underline anything that seems like a euphemism.

Now imagine a world in which the creators of such listings are legally obliged to be absolutely transparent and truthful, no fudging, no hiding things under the rug.

Rewrite the listing as if you are the original poster. This is important. You're not leaving a bitchy review. You're helping consumers make an informed decision.

Be prepared to use your imagination. Say what the original poster failed to say when creating the listing.

If you need some help getting started with that, try filling in these blanks:

A faint but unmistakable odor of _____

If you squint, you can _____

The last person to _____
_____ lost a hand.

UPDATED LISTING:



After you have revised the listing, write a review in the guise of a very satisfied customer. Be sure to mention how everything was exactly as described!

Objects Gone Wild

There's something exciting about objects set free of their traditional confines and documented in unexpected settings.

Take the red velvet couch that photographers Kevin Clarke and Horst Wackerbarth hauled around for years, capturing it alone or with various human sitters in an impressively challenging range of locations, including a New Orleans cemetery, a Tennessee wheat field, an old school NYC butcher shop, and Cape Canaveral.

Now that's what I call an ambitious take!

Though as a small potato, I advise you to select an object that is not a giant, heavy piece of furniture. Lower-stakes logistics mean a smaller budget, more spontaneity, and improved chances for guerilla-style stealth.

The object we'll be dragging around with us must be small enough to fit in a backpack. Ideally, there will be plenty of room left over to also transport your lunch. Better yet, choose something that'll fit in your pocket or wallet, even.

But let's not get too cute! Don't want to wind up with Flat Stanley or yet another knock-off of that sell-out garden gnome.

To safeguard against that, let's randomize things a bit. Start by circling any of the below words that appeal to you. Choose at least three, and add at least one.

Flora/Fauna	Alien	Fragile
Funny	Aged	Edible
Embarrassing	Meaningful	Haunted
Incriminating	Sexy	Miniature
Disposable		

Using your selected words as a sort of divining rod, think of some objects that fit the description, and also meet our criteria in terms of size and weight. Write them below:

If you are feeling a bit stymied, please know that my ideal object turns out to be a sun-faded box of Jell-O 1-2-3 dating back to the mid-70s, though I could also use my grandmother's handwritten recipe cards or draw a self-portrait on a lemon...

Your standards thus lowered, I feel confident that no matter which candidate you pick from the three listed above, it will be a winner. Write the winner's name below:



Now take this lucky inanimate object on an adventure. (SPOILER: you're really taking yourself on an adventure.)

Take lots of photos of your object friend.

Spread some joy around and score bravery points by asking strangers if they'll do you the honor of allowing you to photograph them interacting with your object.

Collect souvenirs along the way—menus, ticket stubs, postcards.

At the very least, you owe it to your object to preserve the memories of your adventure by assembling a travel scrapbook. You're the one with hands.

Word Association Solitaire

Word association may have started as a psychoanalytic tool, but it's evolved into a game, a tool for getting to know someone better or amusing each other on long car trips.

Traditionally, I would give you a word, and you would say the first thing that springs to mind.

Then I'd say another word.

You'd say whatever pops in your head.

And so on and so on and don't keep saying "sex" because that bit's been done to death.

We can circumnavigate this by having you play with yourself (SEX!) for 20 lines.

Each line's word should be inspired by the one written immediately above it.

If you need me to prime the pump:

1. Spoon	11.
2.	12.
3.	13.
4.	14.
5.	15.
6.	16.
7.	17.
8.	18.
9.	19.
10.	20.

Good. Fairly predictable, but good. I have a trick to make things less predictable and more interesting.

Pick one: even or odd.

Get a pen.

If you picked even, go back and cross out all the odd numbered lines. If you picked odd, cross out the evens.

Read over your edited list. The words there still bear some relation to each other, but it's not so on the nose.

Now cross out five more lines. I don't care which. Follow some internal compass known only to yourself.

Done? Good.

Make something that includes the remaining words. An image. A song. A poem or short story.

Take care not to include any of the crossed out words.

Find out what you shook loose when you pruned the tree.

* SCRAP PAPER *

Call It Macaroni



PALATE
CLEANSER!

It's a pity how few artists consider macaroni a viable medium after the age of say, kindergarten.

Macaroni—of all shapes and colors—is the medium we'll be using for this exercise.

No macaroni? No problem. Use dried beans.

And Elmer's. Lots and lots of Elmer's.

Coat your palm with it, let it dry, and freak everyone out by pretending to pull the skin off your hand. Eat some, if you must. We're not here to judge.

Back to the assignment. Working in this medium is a good way to muzzle both our inner perfectionist and the inner critic who insists all creative work must be striving toward a worthwhile end.

It also levels the playing field to a pretty even grade, so don't fret if visual art's not a talent you'd list on your resume.

It takes a while to glue macaroni onto cardboard, so choose a subject you'll be pleased to think about, even if the finished product is unrecognizable.

A quote from your written work.

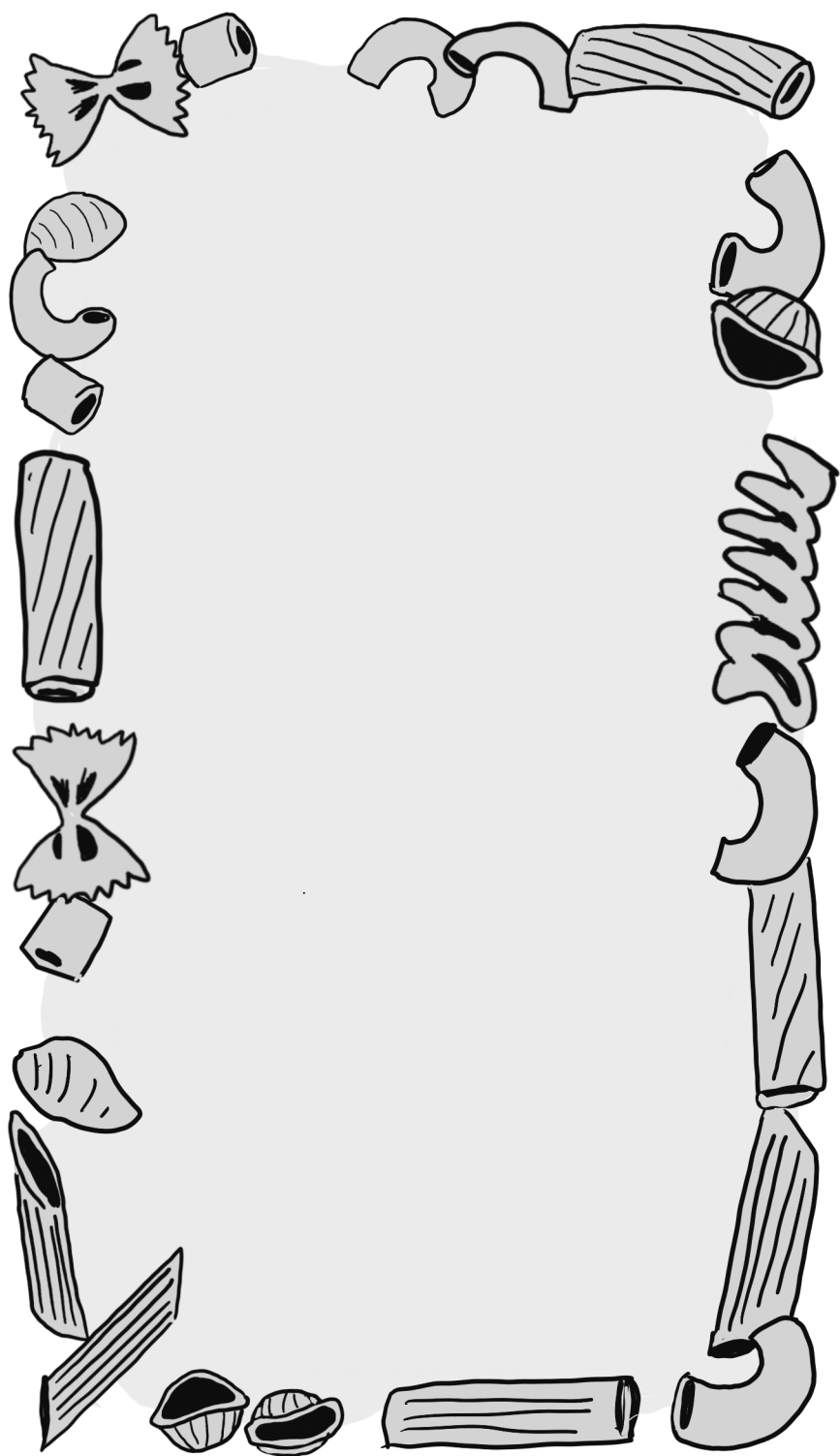
An image from one of your songs.

A portrait of your childhood art teacher.

Sketch your idea on the facing page, as a pledge that you'll actually do this exercise sometime before you die.



This exercise can be an oddly satisfying group activity. Kindergarten didn't occur in a vacuum, and some of us are in desperate need of play. Whip up a pot of *pasta e fagioli* and invite some friends over.



Bubble Point

Some of the art that made a lasting impression when I was at—go figure—an impressionable age has landed on the wrong side of history.

Despite some lingering attachment to certain aspects of these works, I'm not going to argue their merits. Their demerits are weighty enough to shut my mouth.

So, goodbye lovely love song light on consent.

Goodbye, stand-up both funny and phobic.

Goodbye, all you musicals that feature a character named "Injun".

I loved you once, but I'm letting you go, in the quest for evolution and enlightenment. I've missed my chance to leave behind a good looking corpse, but if I've gotta die one of these days, I aspire to be at my best in other ways. Progress!

That said, I also want to hold some space for younger-me. She came of age in a wildly different time. I don't want to completely erase how much that problematic love song mattered to that teenage girl.

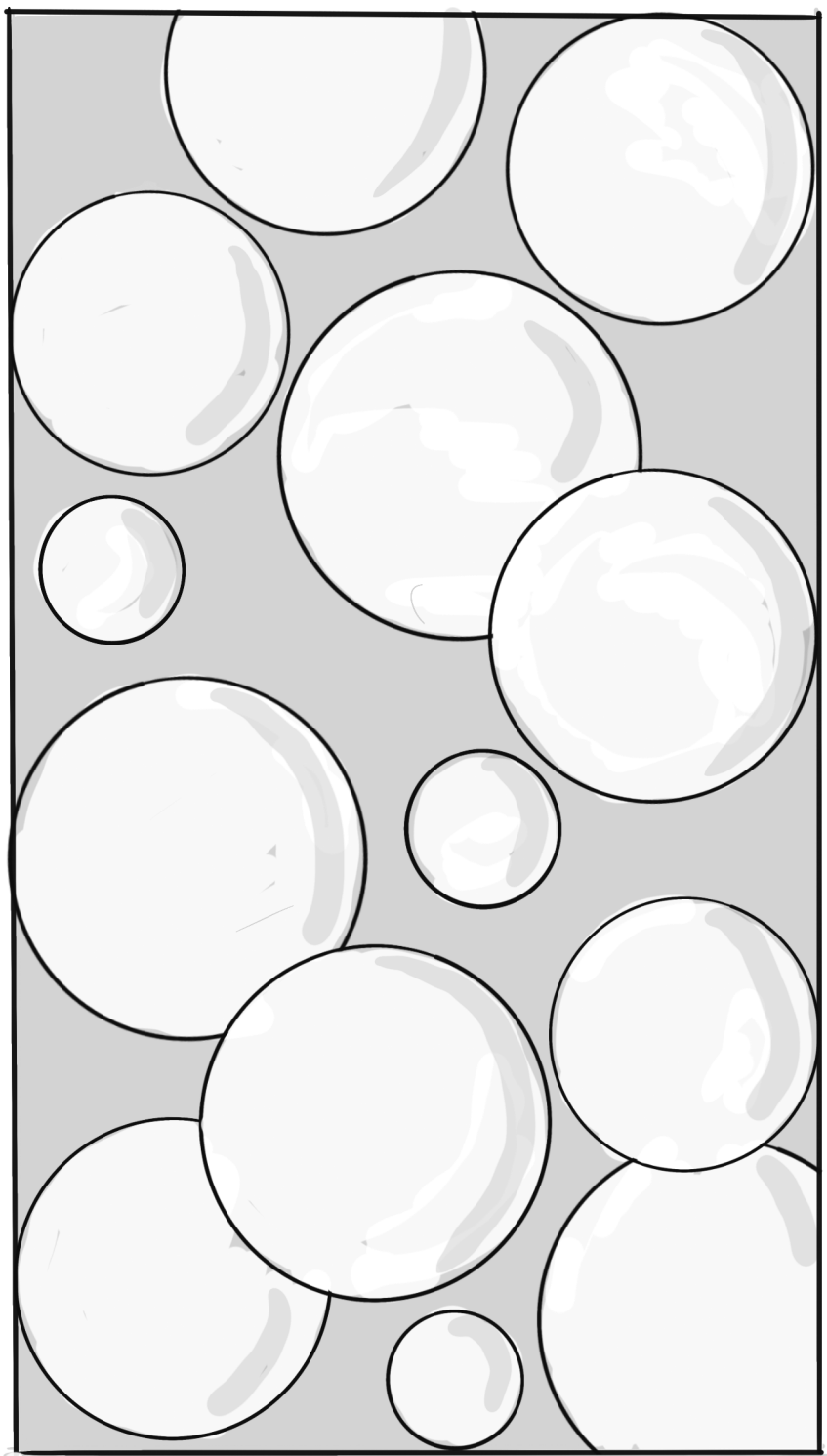
Surely you have some things like that too. Write their titles in the bubbles on the next page.

Then burn this book.

Kidding. Just write the titles. Remember the tender feelings those bubbles once inspired, with the understanding that bubbles are meant to pop.



If you are adamantly opposed to this exercise, you can modify it by filling every bubble with a drawing Glinda the Good. Nature abhors an empty bubble.



First Law of Thermodynamics

When you run across an unfamiliar word or phrase or name or historical event or scientific theory or acronym—*whatever*—for god’s sakes, look it the fuck up!

I’ve forgotten pretty much everything I was forced to study in high school, the math and science that were a requirement for graduation.

The first law of thermodynamics for example.

It’s no problem. I’ll just look it up again (and again and again. Some things refuse to stick).

Do *you* know what the first law of thermodynamics is? Write it below. All you smartie pants astrophysics majors should refrain from gloating while the rest of us hit the “Wonder Killer” as David Herskovits, the Founding Artistic Director of Target Margin Theater, has dubbed the Internet.

Now write an alternate definition. Something plausible but incorrect.

Now write two more definitions. Get wild. Channel the spirit of my pal Denise, who, under the influence of a recently legalized substance, claimed that some random word in the dictionary was “the short form for Franklin.”

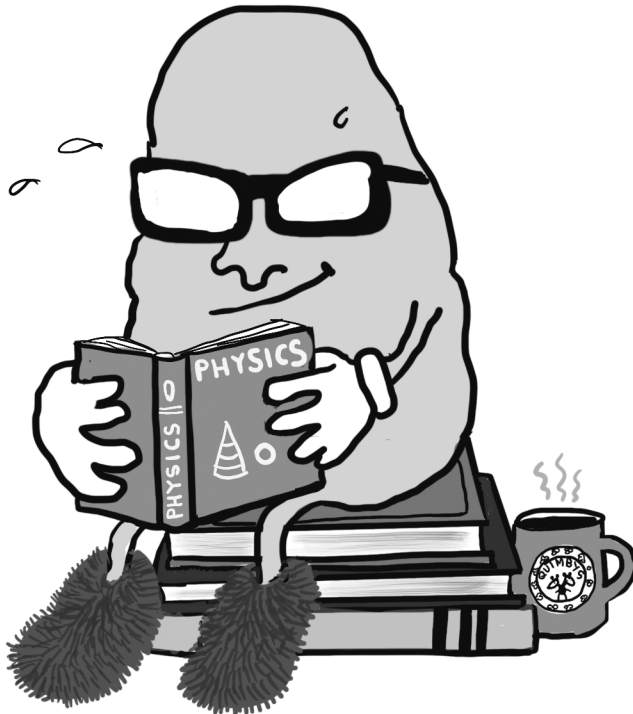
Now that you have four definitions, seek out someone who wouldn't know the first law of thermodynamics if it heated their ass to the boiling point.

Instead of belittling them, present them with your four definitions and get them to tell you which one sounds “right,” and why.

Remember their response. It may contain the seeds of a song, poem, microfiction, or short film about, what else, the first law of thermodynamics.



Repeat this exercise for “lacuna.”



Bear Suit Cosplay

I had the incredible good fortune to encounter a bear suit in a thrift store on a sweltering August day.

It was too hot to think about buying it. I went home, sprawled in front of the fan and reviewed my mental list of things I regret not buying. The battery operated, portable Sesame Street record player whose tone arm looked like Big Bird's arm. The turn-of-the-century scrapbooks from an upstate epilepsy colony. She who hesitates is lost (or doomed to spend a fortune on eBay.)

I went back. It fit perfectly! Of course it did.

Shortly thereafter, my husband wrote a short film about a melancholy French-Canadian bear, wandering the streets of New York City, wondering if her life here is sustainable.

Some very nice viewers told us they thought it spoke eloquently to the universal emotional state, six months into the pandemic.

I thought it spoke eloquently to me having bought a secondhand bear suit for \$40, Greg's interest in trying out a new camera, and a longstanding relationship dynamic that even the most casual *I Love Lucy* fan will immediately grasp. Any elaborate scheme to get him to put me in the act!



I'd like us to do more with L'Ourse, but that first film was so spontaneous, so serendipitous. It's a tough act to follow.

I keep the dream alive by wearing her around. I wear her to the park and the museum. I wore her to vote. Because she has no pockets, she has to carry a purse, a thing I rarely do.

For some reason, that purse-bear combo really strikes a chord with the public. It makes them less-than-shy about approaching me.

My commitment to L'Ourse's ursine origins (and the fact that my French is really rusty) lets me off the conversational hook. Oddly, it also relieves me of the impulse to perform. If some adult tries to lure me into a cutesy booty interaction with a child, I can just shrug, indicate that I don't speak the language, and continue on my way.

L'Ourse can't be bought. L'Ourse doesn't seek your approval. L'Ourse is not ruled by "yes and." It's a rejuvenating exercise for a chatty, attention-seeking extrovert such as myself. Who'd've thunk a thrifted bearsuit could confer such uncharacteristic superpowers?

I lucked into it, but you can be more intentional.

It has to be a get-up. Something that's going to attract notice when worn in public. Something that will alter the way you normally interact with the world. Something to relieve you of the conversational burden, a gift to both the shy and the outgoing.

No performance background necessary. Remember how your favorite stuffed animals had personalities? Same deal, only this time, you're the stuffed animal. (Or pirate or monster or fairy god person or walking hot dog, whatever.)

Don't sweat it if this outfit is not currently in your possession. Monitor your local freecycles and secondhand sellers. Make it, or barter with a crafty friend. Hit the Halloween aisle in early September.

Maybe this character will become a beacon for your creative work.

Maybe this character will provide the perfect cover for you to do something you find creatively nerve wracking, like busking or selling your artwork in the street.

Maybe you'll mostly just wear it to watch TV. (The bear suit is excellent for that on a cold winter's night.)



Before leaving home, take a quick peek in the mirror. Is there a chance you'll be flagged as a robber or terrorist? If so, take care entering banks and airports.



A Dickey Proposition

Ever glance at the clock and realize that, despite your best creative intentions, you've managed to fritter the whole ding dang day away?

It's not exactly a shock when that happens.

Personally, I can tell pretty early on if this is how my day is shaping up. I can feel it in my bones, or more accurately, my butt, which is no doubt still parked on the stool where I ate my breakfast, then continued to dick around on the internet, long after the coffee was gone.

On mornings like that, it can see how, despite my anti-authoritarian streak, it might be handy to have a boss.

Lacking both a boss and a well regulated source of self-control, I call upon Chance to get my ass in gear. You can too!

Start by listing six creative tasks you can and should accomplish today. If you don't have the necessary supplies or are waiting for a collaborator's schedule to free up, don't put it on the list. We're looking for things you can do all by yourself, today.

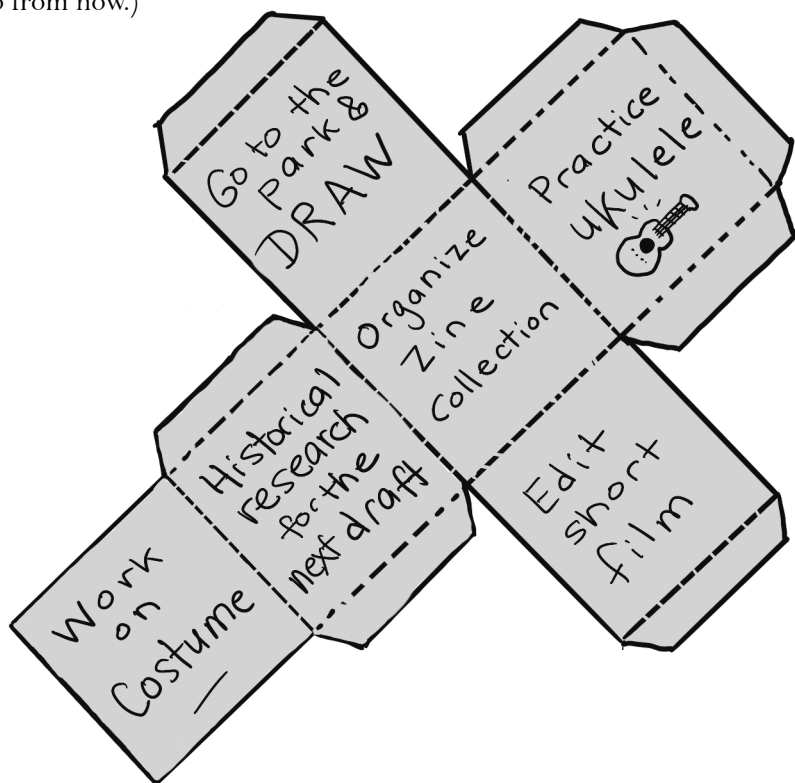
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	

You can be trusted to handle scissors, right? Scan and print the DIY die template on the next page. Better yet, snag one off the Internet!

Once you've cut it out, take a pen and fill the empty squares with creative tasks to replace your infernal shilly shallying.

Fold along the dotted lines, glue or tape the tabs, and get lucky!

(Also get dressed, because whatever side of the die Chance shows you, the expectation is you will hop to immediately, not an hour or two from now.)



Make yourself new dice as needed.

If there are no pressing things in need of accomplishment and your goal is merely to safeguard against an entire day lost to social media, video games, and streaming content, shake things up by asking a fellow small potato to surprise you by loading a new die with creative options.

Don't ever discard your retired dice. Instead, amass enough of them to constitute a collection. Collections deserve documentation, and possibly even exhibition.

Come on, Snake Eyes, Baby needs a new pair of shoes.

Harriet the Spy

Unlike the bear suit assignment, this exercise requires you to be nondescript. If you tend to stand out in a crowd, take a temporary turn toward the mainstream and mousey.

Equip yourself with a wholly average looking notebook and a pen that won't have any performance issues.

Get yourself to a heavily populated public place. One where there will be plenty of people you don't know.

If you are timid, try a cafe or public transportation—someplace where you'll encounter strangers, but the setting is fairly contained, meaning everyone will find a spot and stick to it.

If, as fitness instructors are fond of saying, “you're up for more of a challenge,” head for the sort of location where strangers mill around—amusement parks, museums, shopping centers, and public parks are all fine choices.

Identify a human subject, note the time, and observe them as surreptitiously as possible.

Start with the Law and Order type stuff, and become increasingly nitty gritty.

Age, height, weight, hair and eye color, birthmarks, tattoos. Clothing and accessories. Companions.

Describe their mood.

Document their every action.

Cast penmanship to the wind and scribble down anything you overhear them saying to the best of your ability.

If your subject takes flight, let them go. Don't freak them or risk a confrontation by following them. The one exception may be if they are yakking away on their phone at top volume, totally oblivious to

their surroundings. But even then, take it easy. Don't follow them into the restroom or any place where, say, a young person in heels and a cute dress might feel particularly vulnerable.

Do not interact with them in any way.

Note the date and location when you part ways.

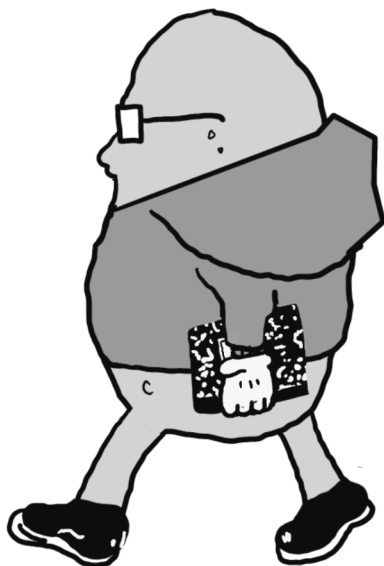


if you managed to learn their name.

Reread your notes at home. Add any remembered details you failed to document. Transcribe your shorthand before you forget what it means.

Put this character in a song or a story. Paint a picture of them. Choose a phrase you scribbled in your notebook during the active observation phase as the title.

If you live in a distant rural area or a small town where everyone knows you, you can modify this exercise by picking a TV show and tracking an extra in a crowd scene. Bonus points for choosing a series that employs the same extras for an entire season.



The 100s

We do hundreds of things 100s of times without considering these actions to be particularly noteworthy.

Most likely, they're administrative, part of the social contract, or critical for the survival of our physical organism and those in our care.

Creative repetition requires more resolve.

It's intentional, ambitious. There's only one way in which it resembles brushing your teeth or washing the dishes, and that is how quickly it can become boring.

The first five or so times you repeat a creative action it's bracing, after which most of us will find that the thrill tapers off quite quickly.

That's the point where we lose interest and quit.

Which is a lousy thing to do if the goal is to improve, or keep from losing ground.

Creative repetition can help you feel more comfortable with an aspect of your creative life that doesn't come easily.

It can become a ritual that calms your mind, and signals the start of any daily art practice.

Doing it 100 times doesn't necessarily require a commitment of 100 days.

Cram it all in over an afternoon or weekend! Go to a cafe and don't leave til you've drawn a hundred eyeballs. (Tip well.)

Alternatively, treat it like piano lessons or a pioneer's bath: once a week, without fail. It's a standing date, so put it on the calendar and don't forget to show up 99 more times.

By all means, take the rest of your life to embroider 100 photo realistic, life size portraits of your feminist heroes. Carve them out of Carrera marble if you prefer!

But for purposes of this exercise, please aim way waaaaaay lower.

We're talking 100 flips of a clown's weighted trick hat, 100 sentences that end in a word that rhymes with blue, 100 attempts to play the same Delta blues lick.

You know what'll help you hedge your bet? A contract that includes your middle name and on which a simple date like March 29, 2023 is rendered as the 29th day of the 3rd month in the 23rd year of the second millennium. Are you prepared to date and sign such a non-legally binding document now?

C O N T R A C T	
I, _____	
being of semi-sound mind do pledge	
on this _____ day of the _____ month	
in the _____ year of the 22 nd millennium	
that I will _____	
100 times, even if it feels like pulling hen's	
teeth after a while.	
X _____	

Quick get that shit notarized, before you can back out!



Posting your progress on Instagram will either help or hamstring you. If you're not sure which, refrain! You can always share all 100 in one triumphant burst of self-glorification upon completion.

Scavenger Hunt

Not to brag, but we small potatoes have pretty keenly honed powers of observation. Presumably, this stems from curiosity.

That's what bothers me about travel influencer culture. They seem way more interested in creating the illusion that they have the rim of the Grand Canyon all to themselves at sunset (#soblessed!) than noticing the nearby flora, fauna, litter, and endlessly fascinating fellow tourists.

If I were feeling charitable, I'd propose that we get together and design them a scavenger hunt, to inspire them to really see what's there.

But, I'd prefer to bestow such a treasure on someone who'd appreciate it.

Let's all design a custom scavenger hunt for a friend or family member whose robust embrace of life makes them a deserving candidate for such a gift.

Write their name below:



Now pick a location that this person can actually get to. One you've been to, too, and have clear memories of in the event you can't re-visit it with this assignment in hand.

EXAMPLES OF FERTILE SCAVENGING GROUNDS

- Interesting Neighborhoods
- Public Parks
- Nature Preserves
- Markets
- Museums

Ooh, that list makes me wanna do some yoga on top of a vintage van with the Reyes filter and a bandana-wearing golden retriever.

Kidding. It makes me want to get cracking on our ratty, highly idiosyncratic scavenger hunts! Have you picked a location yet? Good. Write it down!

Now we're going to generate a list of about 20 items for your person to hunt down and document with photographs. Fun, right? Aim for a mix of softballs and things that will require some patience (or bravery.) Pepper liberally in jokes.

I'll guide you through the first ten, after which you're on your own.

Something_____ (color)
Something_____ (texture
_____ (an animal)
_____ (a plant)
↳ _____ (a reference to a song lyric)
↳ _____ (a particular item of a particular size)
↳ _____ (something that will require talking to a stranger)
_____ (something edible)
_____ (an in joke)
_____ (a secret)

Halfway there! What else have you noticed in this location, and how will you position your person to notice it too?





Toss in a few extra if the spirit moves, but have pity. Don't make the itinerary so jam-packed your person begins to weary of the activity long before it's over.

11.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

20.

Your person will also need some easy-to-follow instructions, the starting coordinates, a checklist, and reassurance that every item on it is open to their interpretation.

When they have completed their mission, buy them a refreshing beverage, and rejoice having engineered an opportunity to experience a familiar location through such a wonderful person's eyes.

An Exercise in Advance of the Next Exercise

Who doesn't cringe, running across a soppy diary entry, letter, or poem in one's own handwriting, years after it was written?

I LOVE BRANDON SOOOOO MUCH!!!

That's a hypothetical by the way. There were no Brandons at my school.

I want to provide a safe space for us to practice before we rip the scabs off. I also want to provide us with some useful copyediting marks.

 ← HORIZONTAL DELETE

This one can be placed over any text you wish to strike.

^ ← CARET

This one indicates the place where any new letter, word, or phrase you write should be inserted.

These two workhorses can do a lot of heavy lifting for us. Behold!

thought I d .
I ^ LOVE ^ BRANDON ^ ~~SOOOOO MUCH!!!~~

said I d because I was afraid of what would happen if they knew I loved Kim.
I ^ LOVE ^ BRANDON ^ ~~SOOOOO MUCH!!!~~

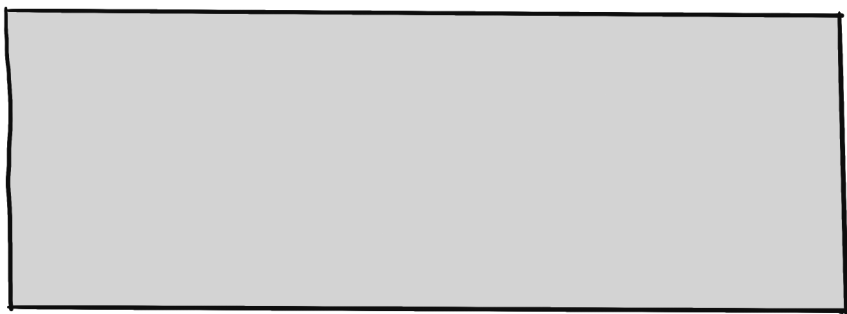
"Hi, I'm the biggest asshole in 7th grade
~~I LOVE BRANDON SOOOOO MUCH!!!~~

Now it's your turn. Polish the original sentence until the truth shines through.

I know, it's hypothetical, but play along. I want to see you go down the bunny hill a few times before we put you on a lift bound for Pain Mountain's highest peak. Have fun and gimme at least 3.



o o o ← TEARS



You're a natural!

So let's expand a bit. Before Google Docs and word processing software, writers would edit themselves by scribbling all over typewritten or, be still, my beating heart, handwritten drafts. If they couldn't squeeze their corrections into the space between lines, they'd draw a meandering arrow and continue in the margins, writing sideways, upside down, and "in my lady's chamber." (Remember when I said I had dozens of words for "vagina"?)



Maybe someday we can take a field trip to Yale to gawp at some big bananas' hand corrections in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

For now, let's review some connective words and phrases that are also handy when one is intent on correcting the record.

BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH BUT

Pick one of those connectors and use it to continue one of the amended sentences that sprang from "I love Brandon soooooooo much!!!"

If the name Brandon has painful connotations, do a horizontal delete and replace it with the name of your choice, using a caret.

Let the (imagined) truth carry you up and around the margins.



Fantastico. But why stop short of catharsis?

Awaken your inner child and ask them to suggest a ludicrous comeuppance that doesn't stoop to body shaming or graphic violence of a non-comedic stripe.

And while we're at it, a round of applause for the youngest among us, for coming up with so many awesome stories that end with a deserving villain falling into a giant toilet or getting eaten by a friendly talking bear.

Now fill this box with things that kids find funny. (Don't say clowns unless you're aiming to have one kick Brandon's butt.)



Pain Mountain (A.K.A. Personal History Redo)

This is what we were practicing for on the bunny slopes of the previous page.

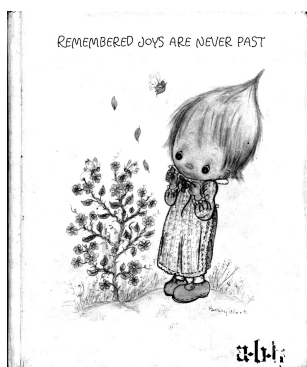
Get out an old journal or letter. One with a Brandonesque cringe factor.

Make a copy. Get a red pen.



Skip this exercise or save it for later if you're struggling with feelings of acute self-hatred.

This exercise is not about sending you slaloming into an Olympic-sized black hole, but rather defusing a grand operatic bomb, releasing something smaller, more universal, and ultimately, funnier. I'm a big believer in healing infusions of funny.



Repeat the motto that was printed on the cover of my 7th grade diary: Remembered joys are never past.

Good thing, because some remembered joys deserve to be modified from a wiser, more experienced vantage point.

Take your copy and circle anything that no longer feels like an objective truth.

(Resist the urge to circle *everything*. Don't go all Mean Girls on your younger self.)

Start with those. You know what to do.

Use your carets and your horizontal deletes.

Let the arrows carry you up and around the margins, to the back of the page if you need it.

When the record's been corrected, push on toward fantasy and catharsis.

Bring things to a swift, entertaining, and above all, childish conclusion.

Fold the corrected copy into quarters, and staple it to this page, but first, neatly copy your revision into the space below, in case the conservationists in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library have trouble deciphering your handwriting amid that forest of carets and arrows.

Remembered Joys are Never Past...

CHECK IN

Hey, how's it going?

Did you have fun attempting some of those exercises?

Was there one you thought you'd hate that you wound up loving?

Was there one you thought you'd love that you wound up hating?

Any that sounded so dumb (or scary) you refused to even entertain the notion?

Let's take a couple of pages to reflect upon these questions. Don't worry about hurting my feelings. I can't see what you're saying.

Dear Diary,


PRIVATE!

PRIVATE!!

KEEP
OUT!!!



SEEDLINGS

This section's exercises ask a little bit more of you. More time.

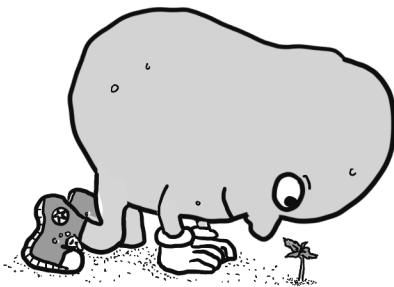
More risk (or courage, if you like.)

In some cases, more words or materials.

I'm hoping that something in this section will inform your future work, that you'll take it and tend to it in such a way that a mighty redwood grows from one of these little seedlings.

But, that's just a guess. For all I know, the one you're really going to chime with is the one where you glued macaroni and dried beans onto cardboard.

I'll just keep throwing them at you. You see what sticks.



The Voyage of the Beagle



I like creative exercises that require me to interact and find common ground with strangers.

As you may have gathered, I'm an extrovert, but I confess, I wasn't always.

And these sorts of assignments have the capacity to make me feel very shy.

I do them anyway. It's like going off the high dive—terrifying on the way up, an out-of-body proposition while I'm actually doing the thing, and a total blast in retrospect.

So! Prepare to initiate conversation with an unsuspecting, possibly unreceptive citizen. You'll be doing so without the visual signifiers that confer credentials on local newscasters and others with "legitimate" reasons for approaching people they don't know. They have a big important looking microphone and an associate with a fancy camera. You're closer to a turtle without its shell.

A strategy I recommend is to offer all strangers you approach an opportunity to participate.

In what?

A project that will take no more than a minute of their time.

What!? That sounds like a scam!

Agreed, especially if you open with "Excuse me, do you have a minute?"

That flag's so red, it's practically on fire.

Start by saying, "Excuse me, I'm doing a project about ..."

Oh right. You need an actual project for that line to work properly.

Documentarian Uli Beutter Cohen has a really neat one, interviewing subway passengers about the books they're reading on their ride. She also photographs them holding their books. It's one of those projects that makes me hope that one day, *I'll* be reading on the subway and a stranger—nay, fairy godmother!—will tap me gently on the shoulder, saying, “Excuse me, I’ve got a project called Subway Book Review. Can we chat briefly about that book you’ve got there?”

I appreciate the democracy of this project. Anyone reading a book on the subway is fair game. They don't have to be a certain age or race or gender or education level. They don't have to be reading a particular kind of book. It's as wide open as it is specific.

The parameters are clear, too. Book, yes. Phone, no.

Perhaps thinking about ways to identify prey at a glance will help you come up with the sort of project that's got legs.

What are some things you might notice and remark upon without creeping your prey out or making their Spidey sense tingle in a bad way? Here's a freebie to start you off, after which it's on you to come up with 3 more:

1. Pet dog
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.



Reflect on the trouble you could get yourself into if your project requires you to comment on a stranger's body, scent, or bathing suit, and choose something else!

Circle one of the above numbers, or come up with something better. That's your project.

Now, where will you seek this prey?

Answer: a heavily populated location where people won't necessarily be irritated by your advances, and won't feel cornered if they are. Avoid places with employees or security personnel. Public park, good. Starbucks, bad. Pedestrian lane of the Brooklyn Bridge, good. Bergdorf Goodman, bad. Ticket Holder line to any event with general admission seating, pretty good, though don't be so relentless as to make an unenthusiastic party feel like their only recourse is to get out of line. Locker room at the gym, or any place where people are in their underwear, bad. Write your location below.

Excellent. Now arm yourself with that opening line. Eventually, you'll memorize it, so you won't get tongue tied during the initial contact. Fill in the blanks:

Hi. I'm doing a project about _____
I'm hoping you could spare a minute or two to _____

Some will readily launch into an anecdote, some will brush you off with an immediate "No thanks" and some will balk until you tell them what the project is "for." Some options:



It doesn't matter if you already know how to use your camera or haven't taken a class in years. Your prey is asking for reassurance that this isn't a con.)

Some prey relish attention. Others will prove more wary. Draw them out with prepared questions. If you're building your project around people wearing hats, ask them **WHERE** they got theirs. **HOW LONG** have they had it? **WHAT** do they like about it? **WHO** do they associate it with? (The Red Sox, fool! Why else would it have those little red socks embroidered on it!?) Fill your quiver with 5 questions below:

1.	?
2.	?
3.	?
4.	?
5.	?

Wahoo! You're ready to rumble! Gather together your documentarian's kit: camera, recorder, pen and notebook.

Use the first page of the notebook as a template for how you plan to document each interaction. Whether collecting identifying information like name, age, occupation and current neighborhood of residence, or pairing a subject with the thing that drew you to them in the first place ("blue cap with Red Sox logo,") do yourself a favor and standardize the way you track each encounter. Note the time and location. Fun, I know. Like filling out a form at the DMV!

Certain prey may want to know if there's a way they can see your finished project. No pressure (especially if the tables have turned and you're now the one whose Spidey sense is going bananas). If, however, you're intending to publish this project on a social media account or website or something, consider handing out cards printed with the relevant information.

Don't forget to say thank you to every participant before cutting them loose. Then figure out what to do with the data.

Continuing Education

About two years ago, my man started taking banjo lessons (a gift from his lovely wife, who couldn't help noticing the banjo she'd given him for Xmas two years earlier was mantled in two years of dust.

He practices for 2 hours a day, every day, and still conceives of himself as a beginner.

I am cut from different cloth. I think I know how to play a ukulele because I own a couple of them, and took a handful of underwhelming group lessons some 15 years ago. Every now and then, my instrument calls out to me from its perch atop a massage table I haven't unfolded in forever, and I'll unzip its case. We reconnect on the bed or the window seat, me inexpertly fingering frets and squinting at some long forgotten tabs, until I conclude, discouragingly, that I don't actually know how to play.

Except I still sort of believe I *can*.

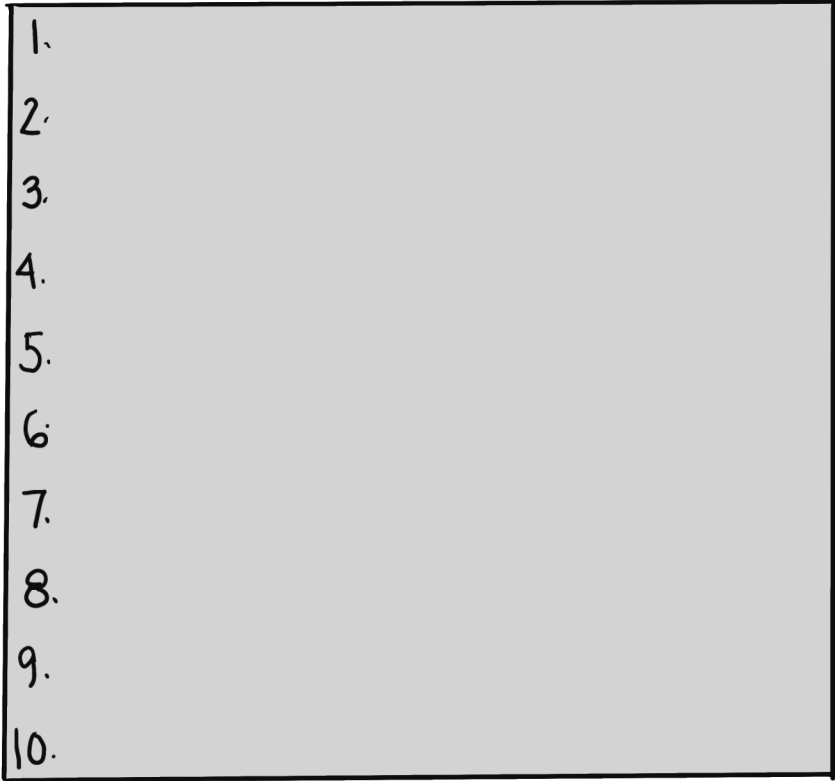
Honestly, time is running out. I can keep floating around la la land, or I can get real about ukulele.

Which means, I probably wouldn't have time to get real about risograph, or hoop dancing, or podcasting, or collage animation, or building puppets, or any of the potential pursuits nibbling at the fringes of my identity. What I wouldn't give to know how to do all those things!

Well, time, for one thing. There's only so much of that. We can dabble in skillshares and one-day workshops til the bears come over the mountain, but let's not kid ourselves. Those are educational taster spoons.

This is hard for me to admit, but sampling a couple of dozen flavors is not as satisfying as sitting your ass down to really savor a beautifully scooped ice cream cone.

List 10 things you'd really like to learn how to do or things you'd like to learn to do better (cough *ukulele* cough):



- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Look at that.

Are there things on the list that would give you a better shot at achieving some project ideas you've been mulling over?

Jot those projects next to the appropriate skills.

Here comes the hard part. The winnowing. I'm sorry, but you do not get to learn all 10 things at once. You don't even get to learn them all this year. You can have three. Take your pick and circle them.

Now we must consider the impact each of these three choices might have on your immediate future. We already know which projects they could put within closer reach, but what will they ask of you?

Start with the first surviving item on your list, then continue through items two and three. No fudging or wishful thinking. Do some research to ground your answers in reality

LEARNING HOW TO _____

Why do I want to learn this?

Where can I learn how to do this?

How much would it cost to begin my studies?

What class dates and times work for me?

How much time would be spent practicing or reading outside of class every week?

Would I need to get any special equipment?

Who do I know who knows how to do this?

How do I feel when I think about studying this thing?

How do I imagine I will feel when I know how to do this thing?

Stray thoughts:

↓ Thing 2

LEARNING HOW TO _____

Why do I want to learn this?

Where can I learn how to do this?

How much would it cost to begin my studies?

What class dates and times work for me?

How much time would be spent practicing or reading outside of class every week?

Would I need to get any special equipment?

Who do I know who knows how to do this?

How do I feel when I think about studying this thing?

How do I imagine I will feel when I know how to do this thing?

Stray thoughts:

Thing 3 ↓

LEARNING HOW TO _____

Why do I want to learn this?

Where can I learn how to do this?

How much would it cost to begin my studies?

What class dates and times work for me?

How much time would be spent practicing or reading outside of class every week?

Would I need to get any special equipment?

Who do I know who knows how to do this?

How do I feel when I think about studying this thing?

How do I imagine I will feel when I know how to do this thing?

Stray thoughts:

Looking over your assessments of these three possible endeavors, does one seem as if one could integrate into your existing life more easily than the others? Which one? Shout it aloud, because you're no doubt sick of filling in little boxes.

If you failed to identify a clear victor, accept that all three are going to cause a certain amount of disruption, and commit to the one that gives you the warmest fuzzies.



Fucked Up Tattoo



PALATE
CLEANSER!

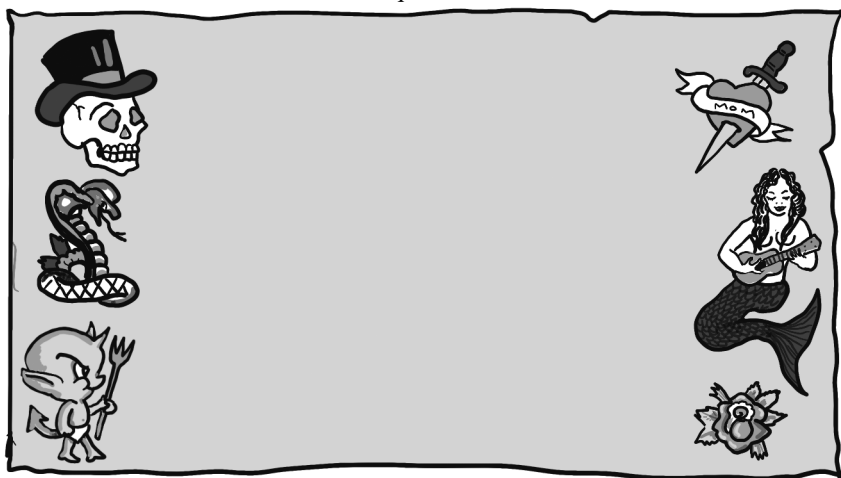
When I was 19, I got my first and, to date, only tattoo.

Not to brag, or date myself, but it was a good few years before permanent ink hit the mainstream. Tattoo shops, like yoga studios and coffeehouse chains, had yet to proliferate. The one I went to was run by a taciturn, well-lubricated vet. I was not at all representative of his usual clientele, and can only imagine his opinion of me and the design I picked from his cheapest flash sheet. A buddy of his was hanging around, and he was far more engaged in their conversation than the developing situation on my right ankle.

I left with a seriously fucked up tattoo.

I'd tell you what it is, but I'd rather you imagine it.

Got it? Good. Draw it in the space below.



Wow, that *is* fucked up! Great job! If I ever get another, that's the one I'm getting.

Not that I regret the one I do have. Someone else might have gotten it removed or covered up. Not me. With every passing year, my tattoo grows a bit more apt. It speaks far more eloquently to who I am than if it had turned out perfect.

Your mission?

Imagine someone, anyone, receiving the tattoo you just drew—a friend, your high school algebra teacher, Jane Austen, a made up character you have yet to flesh out...

Write their name here:



Interrrrresting. Where would you like this tattoo to be located on their body:



There's some other information that could prove germane to your purposes. Job, family, where they live . . . that sort of thing.

Is this their first tattoo? If they're a biker, maybe not. If they're a Mother Superior . . . well, why limit ourselves by leaping to socially conditioned conclusions?

I'll shut up now. I'm sure you're aflame with character details to plug into the space below. Don't expound. Just the facts.



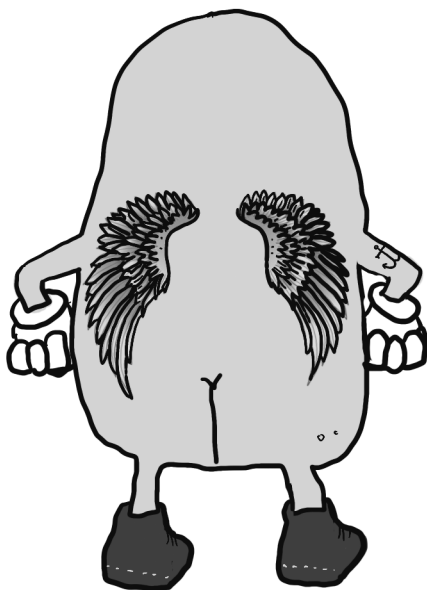
Great balls of fire, look what you've got there! All the elements of a terrific country-western song. Or a short story. Or a comic. Or anything, really. The mind reels.

You're gonna need some paper or a laptop. Possibly a guitar.

The only flavor that's lacking is the perspective of the character who received your fucked up tattoo. Do they hate it? Love it? Love it until someone makes an unkind comment that undermines their enjoyment? If it gasses you up to settle on this perspective in advance, do it. Otherwise, just start messing around. See where the Muse wants to go.



You can play this game more than once, you know. Do one version where they love it, another where they hate it, and a third where the fucked up tattoo inadvertently turns out to be the password that gains its bearer admission to a super secret . . . whoops, don't wanna lead the witness.



Previously Owned



I am blessed with excellent thrift store luck, so much so, I can't think of too many things I need, or really want.

I still like to browse, though. So many objects with so many untold histories to imagine.

Ditto yard sales, though those can be lacking in anonymity. Whoever came up with "For sale: baby shoes, never worn" likely wouldn't have, had there been a chatty seller trailing potential browsers from table to table, explaining how she'd picked those little shoes up at an end of season sale for her son to wear to her sister's June wedding, but by the time June rolled around, that kid's feet were bigger than most 3-year-old's!

Your mission:

Go to a thrift store.

Purchase an intriguing, inexpensive item. Housewares is usually a fertile hunting ground. The toy section is another dependable source of compellingly odd ducks, though heed your sanitation threshold. (Those vintage baby dolls with the fuzzy bodies and the glued on rubber faces skeeve me out.)

Bring your item home. Do not show it to anyone else. Not yet. Spend some time getting to know it. Examine it from every angle. Note areas of damage or wear. Feel its weight. Close your eyes and ask it what its deal is (or, y'know, was).

Ooky spooky, I know, but guess what? Getting a little witchy with this exercise will safeguard against jokiness. Funny is fine, funny is my favorite, but jokey won't carry you much beyond the surface. Plumb the depths to tap the strange.

Listen carefully, and the object will divulge its history. It may be utter horseshit, but that's its prerogative. Yours is to accept, not question.

Position the object against a neutral background on a clean, well lit surface. Take close ups as well as views from every angle.

Format each photo's title as a factual description. Ensure that you are providing a service to future curators, researchers, and educators, who may be trawling the internet for such an item. Once they have alighted on your object, they will have all sorts of questions. Answer them below.

Title:

Who made it?

Where was it made?

What is its intended use?

Who owned it?

Where did they live?

What was their occupation?

What were their household circumstances?

How did the object come into their possession?

Did it have more than one owner?

Relevant information in re: transfer of ownership.

Item donated by _____

Year created: _____

Year acquired by the collection: _____

Clearly, you're well versed in the history of your object.

Celebrate your object in song, story, a series of 14 stained glass windows corresponding to its timeline . . . whatever.

Telescope out and make another piece about your object's original owner.

And another about your object's land of origin.

And another about the thrift shop where it wound up.



Hit a different thrift store in search of items that might have some close correspondence to the original item. Maybe they can be traced to the same owner or place of manufacture. Procure them all and make shit up!



CHILD'S
PLASTIC
DRINKING
VESSEL
WITH
SPOUTED
LID
(circa 2002)

Harmless Smut

Back in second grade, a group of us would gather around David S. during snack break, for our daily installment of his ongoing pornographic serial. It was improvised, oral, and featured all of us. An example:

David E. found a cookie and ate some
of the cookie and his dick grew
THIS LONG!!! And then Chris J. ate some
of the cookie and her boobs shot out to
HERE!!!

This was my first encounter with the erotic (second if you count the drawings of naked ladies in my father's anthologies of vintage *New Yorker* cartoons.)

David S.'s tales didn't scar me in the slightest, but they might've ruined me. It's a rare bit of filth that can hold its own against the robust giddiness of his transgressive little mind. I'm convinced that if he'd kept going, he could have competed with Anaïs Nin.

I understand that pornographic taste is highly personal, but surely I'm not the only one who wants more smut in the spirit of David S.—silly, untethered to reality, and unlikely to damage a curious child who stumbles across it.

If we're gonna do this thing, you're gonna need to come up with some euphemisms.

So gimme an anatomical part of the type commonly described to children as "private parts." Write its non-euphemistic name below:



Anatomical Part: _____

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Anatomical Part: _____

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Anatomical Part: _____

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Oh, MY! Pass me my smelling salts! Given that pornography involves more than just human meat, let's turn our attention to replacing certain shopworn adjectives with ones whose erotic potential remains virgin territory.

SLICK "THOBBING"
HARD MASSIVE
dripping, rosy

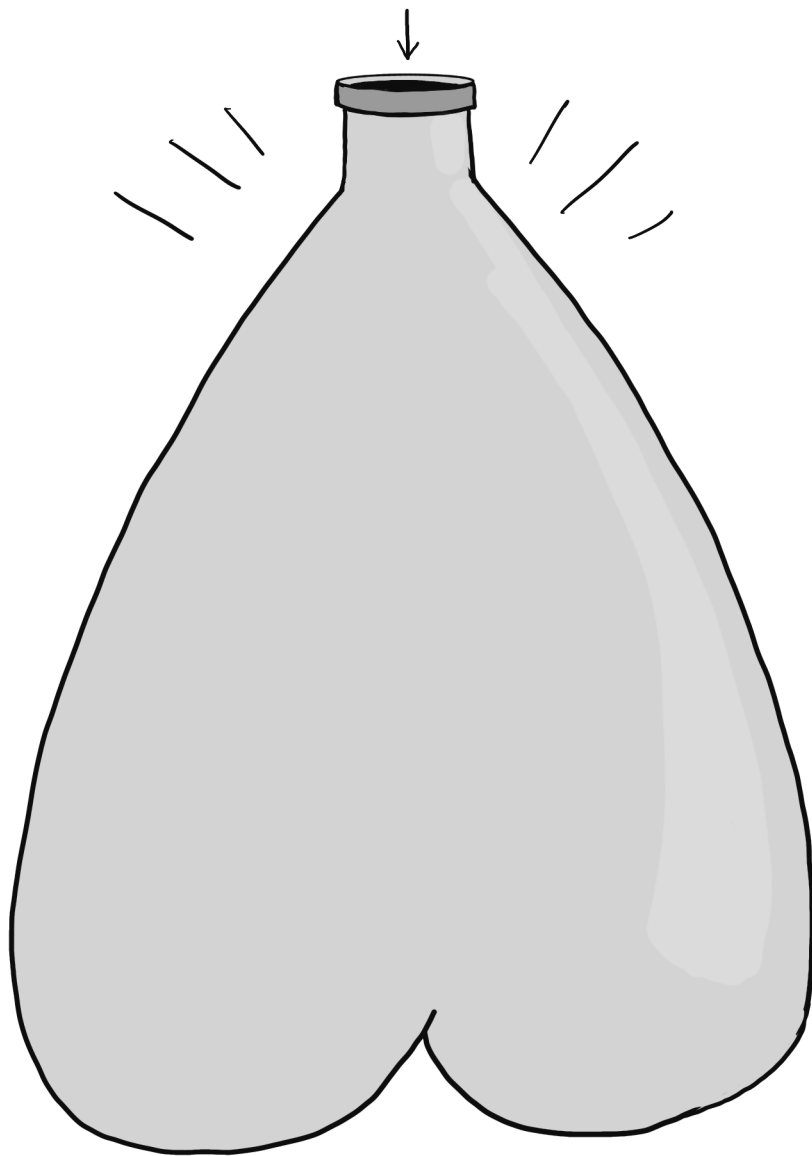
I know. The mind reels. Focus it by thinking of other things you associate with those words, for whatever reason. Jar lids, a dislocated knee, El Yunque, Central Park's Conservatory Garden...

Whoops, hope I didn't steal any of yours! Please don't feel obliged to provide context. Don't worry about grammar. Anything can be repurposed as similes, metaphors, or pet names when you get down to business. Slip your pen in there, cross out all those flavorless, overly chewed adjectives and use your sexiest handwriting to surround them with your glorious substitutions.

And while you're at it, come up with some sexy locations. And maybe occupations, but please, no more appliance repairmen and horny housewives. (Appliance repairwomen and horny househusbands might bear fruit however.) If this is to be a non-anonymous encounter, you're gonna need some names.

I expect there's something in your past that you can draw on. Adding a few of those ingredients can yield a very potent brew.

Mix them up in a vessel shaped like an inverted valentine:



What will you make with this steamy mix?

That's PERSONAL! Pick a few components, take a swig, and mess around.

Word is the brain is the sexiest organ of them all . . . something the precocious David S. seems to have grasped at a very young age.

Tree of Influence

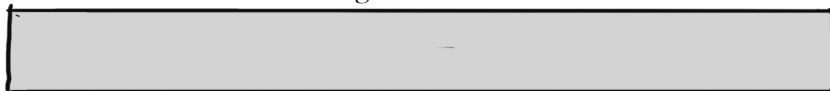
One of my favorite artists, Nina Katchadourian, of Lavatory Self-Portraits in the Flemish Style fame, has a tremendous installation, the Genealogy of the Supermarket, which groups familiar product label images as if those pictured therein are all related and the wall is their massive family tree.

If Nina can tease out the relations between consumer products, surely we can construct a family tree of sorts for all the creative influences and influencers who made us what we are today.

What's your first memory—or an early memory—of intentionally making some type of art, music, performance, or story?



Who or what spurred you to make that thing? Were you trying to emulate your favorite comic strip? Or impress the most popular girl in school? Did grandma drag you to a matinee of *The Nutcracker Suite*? Who or what should get the credit here?



That's a hell of an ancestor!

Don't give up if you drew a blank. We can't all remember that far back.

For many of us, including myself, it's easier to start closer to the middle . . . a funny way to think of young adulthood, but that's when things really get cooking, right?

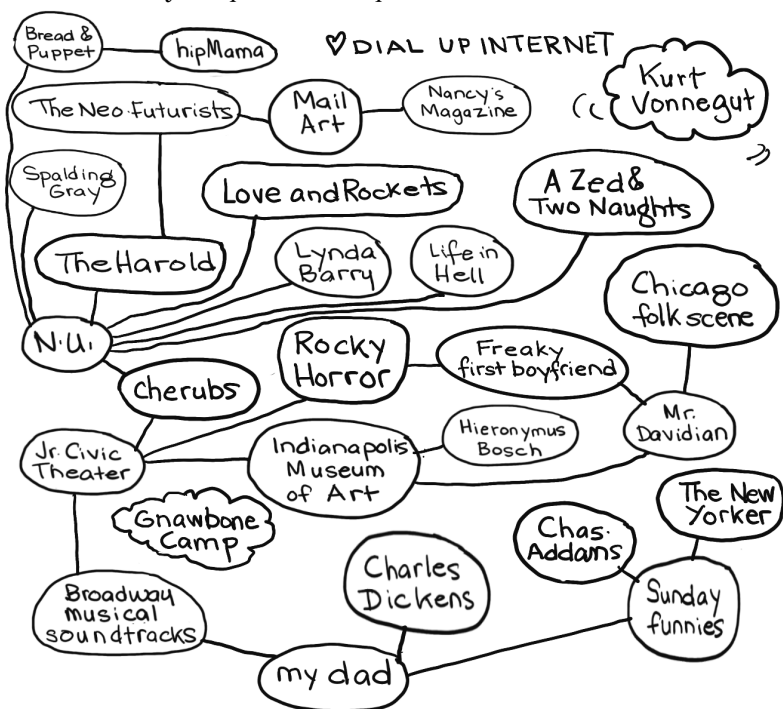
I was a pretty arty kid, but my influence tree quadrupled its branches sophomore year of high school owing to a concentration of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll.

If your lease prevents you from scribbling on the wall, get a few packs of sticky notes, a sheaf of posterboard, or a roll of butcher paper.

Don't be too precious about keeping things neat and tidy. Creative histories are messy! And not quite as clear cut with regard to who-begat-whom.

So let's flip this tree. Rather than conceiving of your earliest recollection as the great being from whom all other influences are descended, think of it as a little green shoot in your tiny fist that keeps sending up tendrils and buds which in turn send up tendrils and buds, like an unkillable Trader Joe's Christmas Cactus.

Here's a very simplified example:

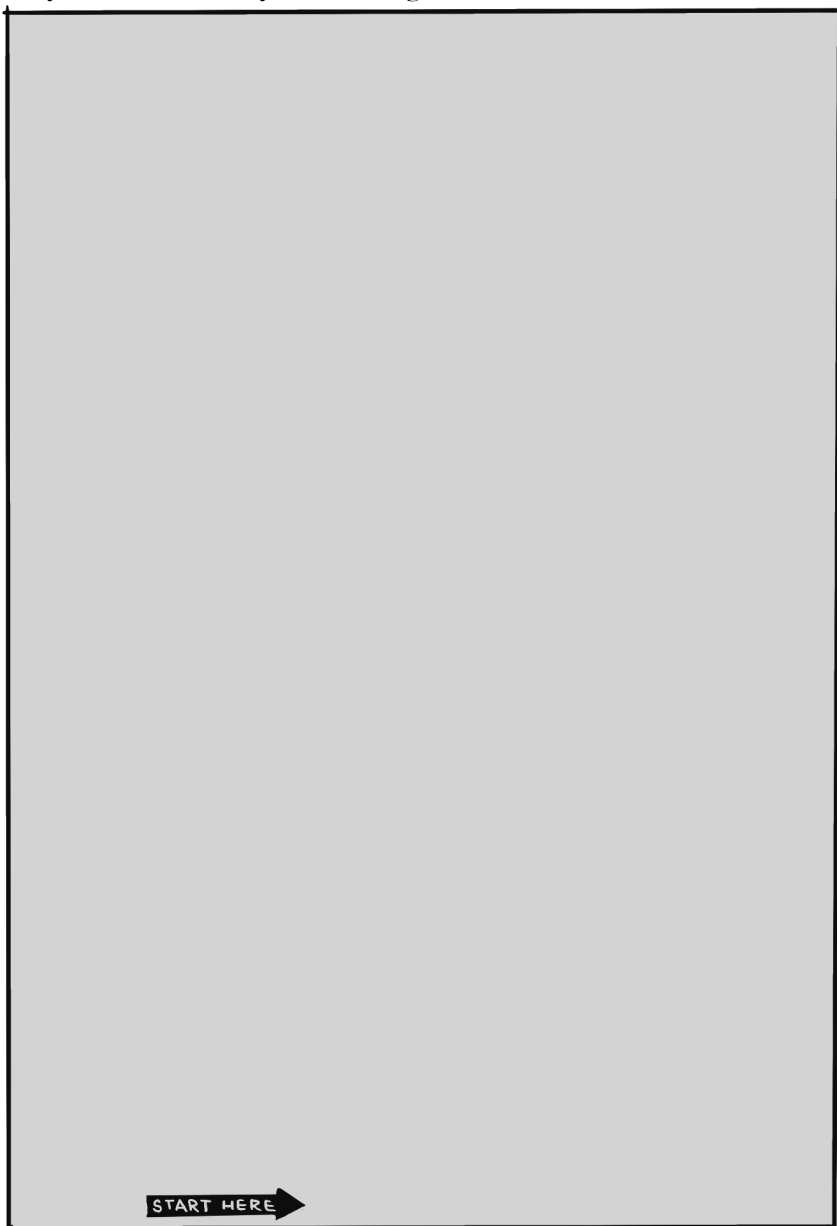


What to do about all the book, film, and album titles dancing in your head? Sprinkle them in and around the branches, like ants on a log.

Take a photo when you're done.

It's possible you will forget an absolutely crucial influence. Don't beat yourself up about it. Just do something with it.

Amanda Palmer has a song that gets me right in the ol' brisket, about accidentally leaving out YA author Judy Blume when an interviewer asked her to list her influences. Give it a listen, especially if you're unclear why we're doing this.



The Rashomon Effect

One of my favorite jokes concerns an actress of a certain age who's been cast as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. A reporter asks her to describe the play, and she responds, "Well, it's about this nurse..."

I sympathize, and wrote a solo show to prove it. There's a very small window for playing Juliet, but I'm banking I can get away with playing the Nurse for the rest of my life. My Nurse is understandably eager to set the record straight. I was trained to hold Shakespeare in high esteem, but it's undeniably fun to hold forth as if he's some hack who got nearly every detail wrong.

Think of some books, films, plays, and, oh what the hell, operas that matter to you and write their titles below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

For each title, write the name of a supporting or incidental character whose perspective might vary pretty radically from the narrative driven by the protagonist.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

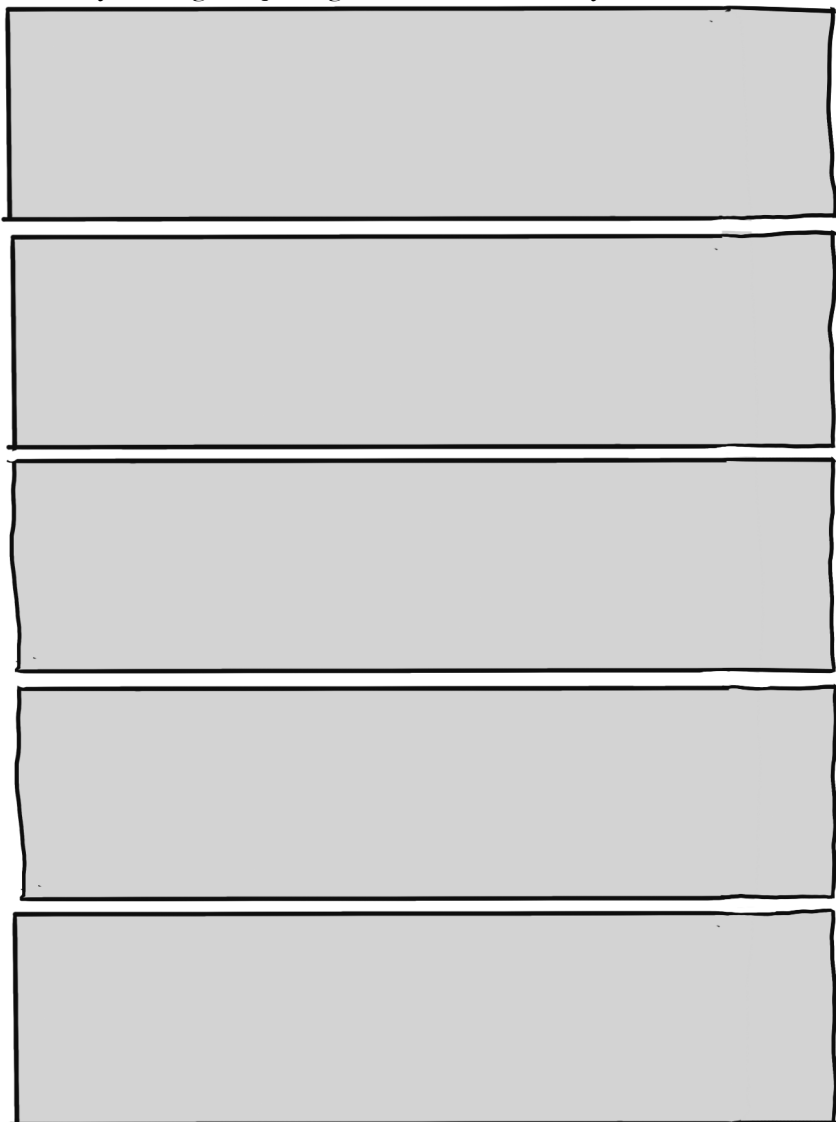
The Nurse's first line in *Romeo and Juliet* is:

Now, by my maidenhead, at twelve year old,
I bade her come. What, lamb! What, ladybird!
God forbid! Where's that girl? What, Juliet?

In *NURSE!*, the Nurse's first line, delivered with bottle in hand, is:

I love teenagers!:

Try writing an opening sentence for each of your selected characters.

The image contains five identical, empty rectangular boxes stacked vertically. Each box is light gray with a thin black border, designed for a student to write an opening sentence for a character.

Ha! You're a natural.

Circle the meatiest, funniest, and/or compelling one.

Pursue it in the medium of your choice.

One a Day



Let's revisit the notion of doing the same thing 100 times. Are you doing it?

Relax, I'm not here to check up on you. I'm here to propose a variant.

Pick some things.

This has nothing to do with bolstering a skill in need of some work (in my case, drawing horses and hands.)

Just pick some things. Tangible things.

A tree, a rock, a cloud
A penis, an eggplant, a banana 
A hydrant
 an umbrella
Grandmother's sugar bowl

Quick, stop me before I gobble up all the good ones!

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Very good. Now, head back up to the top of the list, and give the first item a minute or two's consideration.

Its appearance. Its heft. Its singularity, or lack thereof. What it smells like. How it tastes. Its intended function. Its origin story.

When you have finished doing this, say its name out loud, and bow your head to show it respect. Even if it's a can of Spam or a urinal cake.

Repeat the process for every item on the list.

Is there one you're drawn to more than the others? Great. Write it down. If not, just choose one and write its name below:

I hope you picked wisely because that's your creative theme this month.

Every day, make something in celebration of your chosen item. Some of the things you can do:

Write a song about it ☆ Write a poem about it.
Make a costume of it, put it on, film passerby's responses
Anthropomorphize it and make a comic ☆ Fanzine
Diorama ☆ Absurdist Stand up ☆ Interpretive Dance
☆ Interview others re: their relationship to it ☆
Sculpt it ☆ Repeating pattern on fabric or wallpaper
Short film ☆ Recipe ☆ Embroider it onto a merit badge

Lemme muzzle myself while you chime in with ideas of your own...

On days when the celebration of your object is ephemeral or performance-based, document it with photos or video. Don't toss anything out. After 30 days, the theme may be unveiled as an exhibit, catalog, or illustrated lecture.

The best possible outcome would be discovering an affinity for a creative pursuit you've never tried before.

The interpretive dance field is about to get a lot, lot bigger . . . can you feel those tracks a-rumblin'?

☆ TRACK YOUR PROGRESS ☆	
<u>Day</u>	<u>Day</u>
1	16
2	17
3	18
4	19
5	20
6	21
7	22
8	23
9	24
10	25
11	26
12	27
13	28
14	29
15	30
	31

Eleven Eleven

11:11 is not my lucky number, but, like many people, I get a buzz if I happen to catch it when checking the clock.

Two opportunities daily. Less if you go to bed early or sleep 'til noon.

Once upon a time, there was a tradition of honoring those who perished in WWI with a minute of silence every November 11 at 11:11.

I love that.

I also love that it's Kurt Vonnegut's birthday, and the day that most resembles corduroy.

For this exercise you will need a portable alarm set for the 11th minute of every waking hour on any given day. Also something to write and/or draw with, and something capable of taking pictures and video.



if you confound the digital gods by using something other than your phone to perform one or more of these functions.

Every time the alarm sounds, document what's happening in that minute.

Thusly will you commit at least a dozen ordinary moments to memory.

It doesn't really matter whether they're general ("8:11am—bus to work") or specific (a stealth photo of the complicated hairdo sported by the passenger seated directly ahead of you),

Mark your calendar to revisit this day in a year's time. I think you will be pleasantly surprised, amazed even, by the fullness of your recollection.

It's a great assignment to give yourself when you feel tapped out, and incapable of getting anything going.

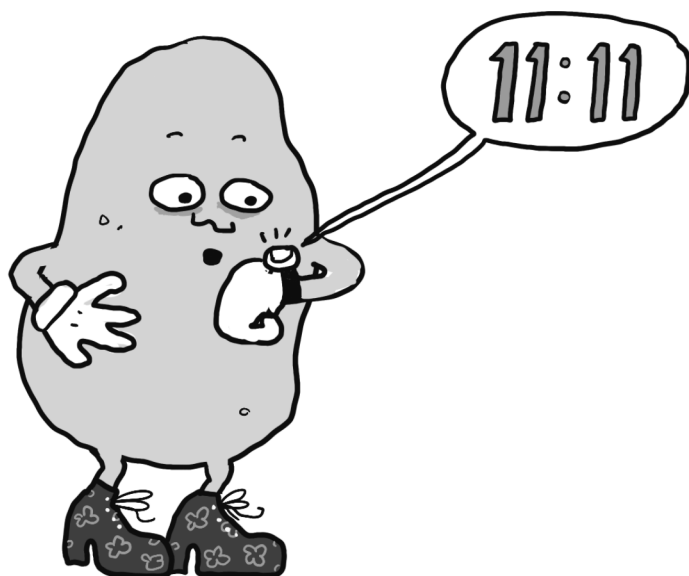
As long as you're breathing and don't forget to set the alarm, you'll get *something*.

For added fun, make it a group activity—have everyone in your household, family, class, or coven track the eleventh minute of a mutually agreed upon day. Then get together and compare notes.

Dare I suggest that you figure out a way to musicalize the results of this communal effort?

Relax, you don't have to write a whole musical.

Just the Act I closer, that thrilling number where all the major characters get a chance to belt out their secret hope, or their big goal, or what they were doing at 11:11 before converging in glorious harmony designed to elicit thunderous applause before the audience makes a break for the bathroom.



Consumer Joy

When one of my books receives a particularly passionate one-star customer review, I like to walk it back to see what else this tastemaker has reviewed.

It almost always turns out they hate everything.

Or else they love a 26-Inch Flexible Dryer Vent Cleaner and a particular brand of coconut milk a helluva lot more than they love me.

Why come people gotta be so shitty? Anonymity makes monsters, I guess.

Back before the Internet was invented, actor Don Novello, best known as *Saturday Night Live's* Father Guido Sarducci, wrote letters to corporations and right-leaning politicians, signing them Lazlo Toth.

Lazlo was imaginary . . . also blindly patriotic, completely unsarcastic and enthusiastic to a fault. His appreciation for the people and products he believed in was so over the top, its beneficiaries were unnerved. It's palpable on their side of the correspondence Don Novello collected and published as *the Lazlo Letters*.

There is, of course, a rich tradition of comedians hiding behind alter egos in order to publicly trick various pompous asses, corporate shills, and other assorted hypocrites, but it's rare to find someone pulling it off with such concentrated positivity. Lazlo is not so much a trickster as a holy fool.

It's a lovely mask to try on in this harsh world of ours.

I want you to become, however briefly, a chatty, deeply uncritical soul who delights in one specific thing.

Ladybugs, for instance. Type "ladybug" into the search box of a giant online seller, and you'll get 50,000 results, all in need of your glowing, unhinged review.

To what will you give your emphatic, universal approval? It can be something you don't have any particular opinion about yourself. You might even dislike it a bit. But once that mask is in place, look out! A feast of adoration looms. Give yourself five things to choose from.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Now cross out three or four. What's left is the stuff that makes your reviewer's giant trusting heart (and uncritical brain) go pitty pat in a big way. I'm already a little bit in love with this character and I don't even know their name.

Name:

Some other things I'd like to know:

Where do they live?

What do they do for a living?

How old are they?

Anything else that might prove important?

Personal tidbits such as these definitely have a place in the reviews you'll be leaving.



Work your (imaginary) pet's name into every review you leave.

Sectional Sofa Approach

A lot of narrative projects get in trouble when they cross over into uncharted territory. Here be dragons, and god knows what else.

I'm glad somebody knows, because I sure don't.

What I do know is that for these projects, a 70s style sectional sofa is a much sturdier working metaphor than some 18th-century vessel piloted by scurvy-afflicted flat earthers.

So throw some Al Green on the hi-fi and dim the lights. You cool to see where this goes, baby? Circle one.

I do/ do not consent to spending time on the sectional sofa.

Actually, your characters are the ones you'll be parking there.

All you need is a basic handle on their temperaments and any other little defining quirks. Like, character A's an easygoing, recently divorced slob, and character B's a recently divorced pirate who's overly sensitive about his eyepatch. (So, not your standard *Odd Couple* rip off...but close! Archetypes work well here.)

Don't let the "sectional sofa" reference trick you into thinking the action will be confined to a standard living room.

Really, the opposite is true.

I'm going to give you 10 environments and then you're going to give me 20 environments.

Each one of these environments can be considered a module.

Another name for sectional sofa is modular sofa. Whatever you call it, its great promise is that it's sturdy, but not fixed. You're supposed to rearrange its various components, switch things up, until you find a pleasing order that suits your needs.

1. The beach
2. A packed subway car
3. Outer space
4. A hotel room
5. Total darkness
6. The dump
7. A library
8. An awards ceremony
9. A cottage made of candy
10. The Komodo dragon enclosure
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.
- 21.
- 22.
- 23.
- 24.
- 25.
- 26.
- 27.
- 28.
- 29.
- 30.



MODULES

Having generated these modules, drop your characters into them, and see how they behave.

Do it in any order you like, but commit to trying all 30, no matter how preposterous some of these scenarios might seem.

It's an investment, like any sofa of this size, so be patient. Don't give in to any mid-commitment slumps urging you to jump ship

Once you've observed what happens when your characters are placed together in all 30 environments, you'll have generated a sectional sofa whose size qualifies it as the first draft of a full-length novel, graphic novel, play, or film script.

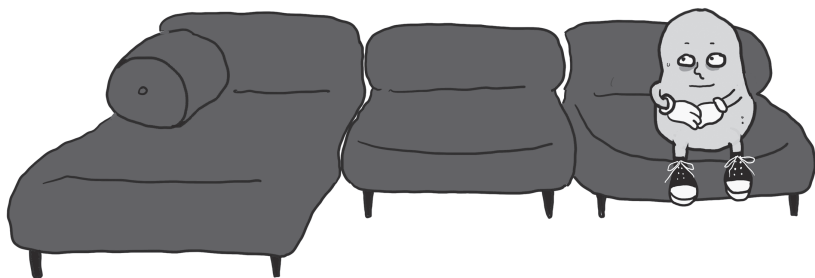
Like any first attempt, it will benefit from rearranging.

You may need to bring in another corner piece to make sense of the thing.

Or haul a couple of distracting ottomans out to the curb.

You may discover you want to set the entire thing in a dim sum parlor, in which case don't forget to thank the other 29 units for helping you to discover so much about your characters, your project and yourself, before you give 'em the ol' heave ho.

Which section will you tackle first?



Roadside Attraction

I love small museums that are dedicated to a single subject, like Edgar Allan Poe, the US Postal system, or Troll dolls. Ephemera that might seem tangential or mundane in another context become objects of fascination thanks to the tantalizing tidbits of information the curators drop on the accompanying cards.

Allow me to be the first to say that I would *gladly* visit any museum dedicated to some aspect of your creative history . . . your band, your zine, your Blue Period, the real life story that inspired your as-yet-unfinished novel, your neutral mask work with a devotee of Jacques Lecoq, every dance costume from age 3 to the present . . .

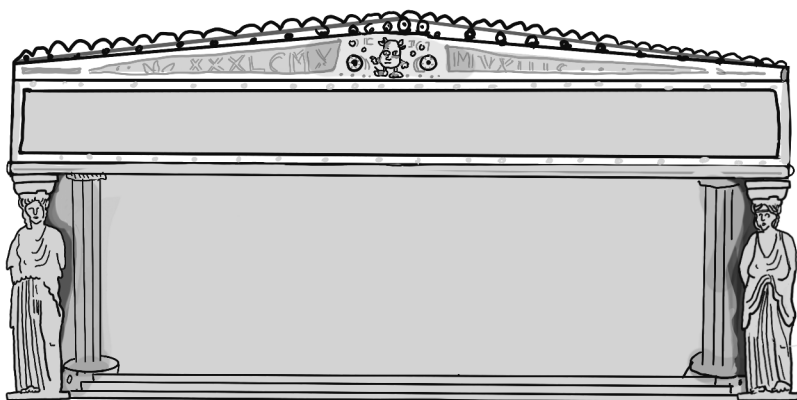
No need to break ground. Just begin gathering the artifacts that will comprise your first exhibit, and prepare informational cards to display alongside each. If you're tech-savvy, assign each item a number I can plug into my mobile phone to hear audio of you describing the piece's significance.

Give me dates, locations, anything that will make me sound informed when I'm regaling my husband with all the wonders he missed when he decided to wait out the rest of the visit on a conveniently placed bench. (His museum stamina is much lower than mine.)

Please dig deep. I am going to assume that any nim-nim can find the best known examples of your work online. I'm the kind of nim-nim who craves correspondence!

Event flyers! The keys to a studio space you no longer control! A dingy old puppet you made from your mom's cast off spring coat. Extra points if you display it next to a vintage photo of her wearing the aforementioned coat. (Whoops, sorry, I may have confused you with Jim Henson for a second there.)

I'm not suggesting your museum has to have caryatids, but use the space between the caryatids to jot some of the major attractions one could find therein. Etch your museum's name onto the entablature, so they'll know whose roof they're supporting.



Why stop there? List a selection of refreshments available for purchase in the museum café:

And a few of the bestselling items in the gift shop:

The café and gift shop can exist as figments of your imagination, but I am serious about the museum.

Put together a traveling exhibit, that you could pack in a couple of suitcases and set up in a room. Offer periodic tours.

Or make it a one time only thing. Set it up, and photograph the exhibits. Invite friends to come over, disguised as tourists and art world luminaries. Photograph them peering at your exhibits and perhaps enjoying an event geared toward that desirable under-30 set.

Every museum needs a web presence, so buy a domain name and build a website. Have fun naming your virtual exhibits. Sell t-shirts and pencils with your logo.

Hide under your bed should an actual visitor roll up . . . or hire a security guard, send them through the metal detector, and collect their admission fees.

Interview II

Remember your initial interview, all the way back at the beginning of this book? Flip back to it.

Remember how some questions required more space than we'd allotted?

Look for the stars.

If you didn't put any stars, or *sob sob* skipped the interview entirely, you march right back there and write those wrongs! (That was a typo, but fuck Freud. I'm leaving it in.)

While I stretch out with some cucumber slices over my eyes, howabout you expand upon one or more of those starred questions?

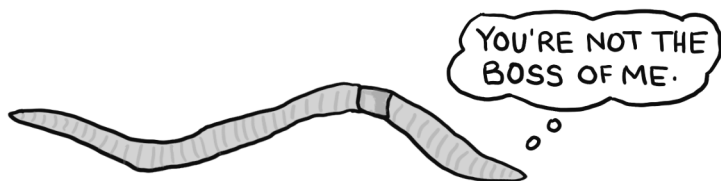
If you hit a wall, edit the question by tacking "and why" to the end of it. That oughta shake something loose.

Anyway, you've got 5 pages to play with.

Each is topped with a by-now familiar oblong. Copy the starred question into the oblong, then use the space underneath it to write the answer.

You can also go cross country by posing a question you wish you'd been asked inside any / all oblongs of your choosing.

If you're some sort of journal-averse rebel, a) congratulations on making it this far, and b) I've got an alternate activity for you. Outfit each oblong with an earthworm, and fill the rest of the blank space with lyrics, sketches, or 95 more earthworms, to bring the total earthworm to 100, thus fulfilling another assignment you may or may not have tackled.)



~~Earthworm~~ question goes here 2











Found in Translation



PALATE
CLEANSER!

I think someone deserves a little reward for all the writing they've been doing. (No, not me. YOU!)

It's just a fun little pick-me-up, but its powers of creative refreshment are considerable.

Flip back through the book and choose a paragraph or two that you wrote in connection with one of your assignments.

Now choose 3 languages other than the one in which you wrote your selected excerpt, and write them below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Connect to wifi.

Type your selected into the online translation tool of your choice, and have it translated into the first language above.

Copy the translation and have it translated into the second language above.

Copy *that* translation and have it translated into the third language above.

Copy *that* translation and have it translated back into the original language.

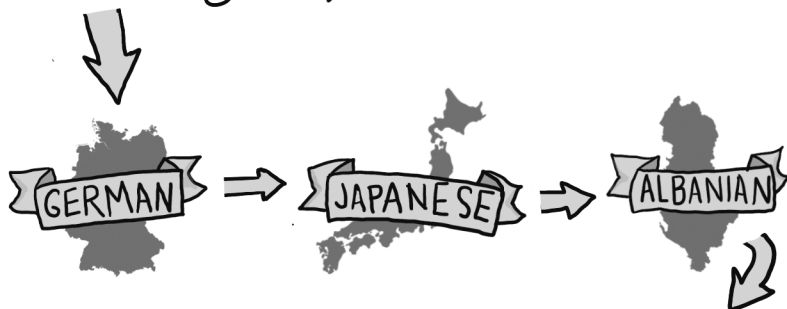
Write the final yonder.

↳

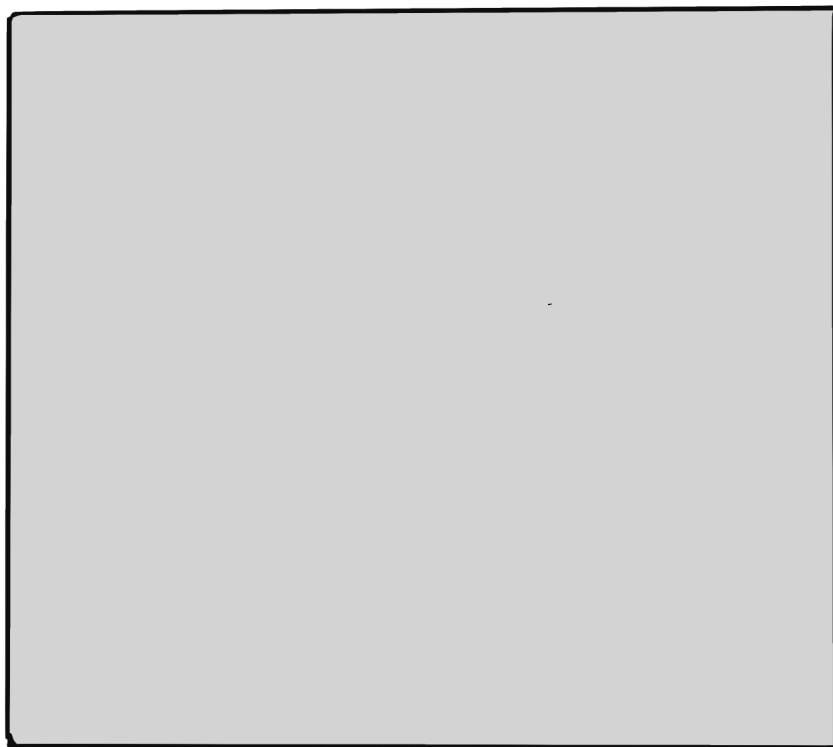


Remember this trick the next time you feel quagmired by stagnant prose.

Look for the stars. If you didn't put any stars or *sob sob* skipped the interview entirely, you march right back there and write those wrongs! (That was a typo but fuck Freud. I'm leaving it in.)



Search for the stars. If you are not a star or *cried* skipped the interview at all, go back and write down those mistakes right away. (That was a typo, but you kill Freud. Leave him alone.)



The Most Interesting Job

What profession strikes you as endlessly fascinating?

Huh. I'd have cast my vote for sanitation worker. Well, we've all got our reasons. What are yours?

1. Because

2. Because

3. Because

4. Because

5. Because

6. Because

7. Because

8. Because

I've got to hand it to you. You make a convincing case. Are you a lawyer?

If so, have you an opinion on movies and TV shows set in law firms? I expect it's similar to the dim view medical professionals take of anything purporting to take place in a hospital.

Ye gods, I'm actively hoping you didn't choose "doctor," "nurse," "hospital administrator," "lawyer," or "paralegal" as your most fascinating profession.

Though it's okay if you did. We're not gunning for a three season story arc with this exercise (though by all means, do so on your own time if the spirit moves you).

What we're doing here is making eight little pieces of art embodying each of your "because" statements.

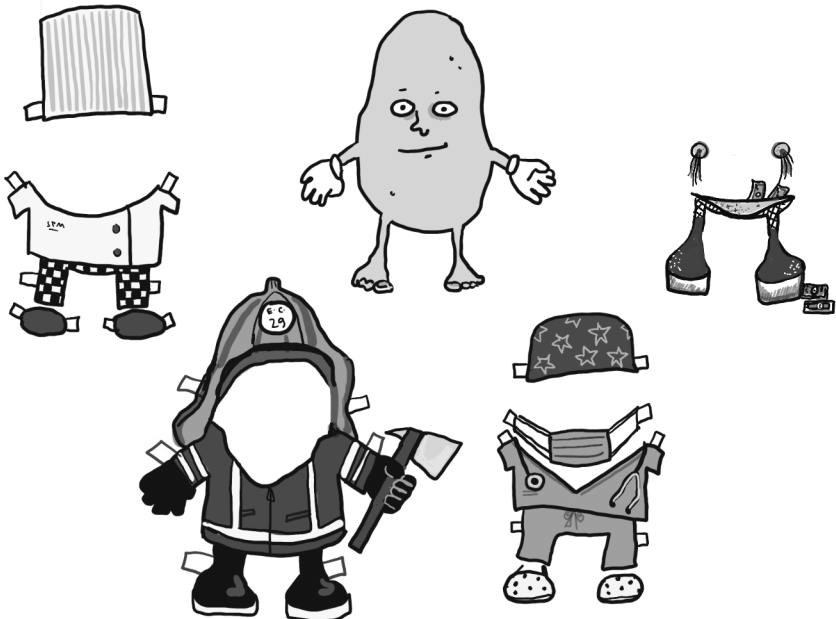
You don't need to know everything about the profession for that, nor do you need to cleave to reality. That doctor who hates every hospital show for its lack of reality would probably *love* a tapestry that depicts them smiting a giant fire breathing squid.

It's cricket as long as it's a legitimate interpretation of one of your "because" statements. Most flights of fancy are defensible as allegory, no? Leave that professional thinking, "Well, it's not entirely accurate, but I don't miss the boring parts when I'm being misrepresented in such a flattering light."

The collective title of these works should contain a specific reference to the profession that inspired them, a la *Magnum P.I.*, *Brenda Starr, Girl Reporter*, or *Reid Fleming, World's Toughest Milkman*.



For maximum impact, stick with the same medium for all eight. Make them something you can display, publish or perform as a set.



Birth

Whether small potato or big banana, birth is a fairly commonplace metaphor for artists to reach for, when they're putting a new creative project out into the world.

What if we really leaned into that birth metaphor—got out of our heads and used our bodies to deliver a project in a truly newborn state, without any concern for how it will be received.

(When birthing an actual human baby, you needn't worry that it will be received as something less than a miracle. Even the people who think your baby's kind of ugly will have the good manners to refrain from saying so publicly.)

If you are a dancer, yogini or theater kid, this assignment is going to feel familiar.

The rest of you? Allow me to offer some reassurance that I have successfully midwived groups of *teenagers* through this experiment, and even though some were initially pretty reticent, the results were never less than wildly gratifying and gratifyingly wild.

Heads up: this kind of labor can get as loud as the other kind. Free yourself from inhibition by scheduling it for a time when you'll have the place to yourself. Forget the neighbors as much as possible. Let them speculate.

Give yourself plenty of time. Half an hour to do, half an hour to reflect.

Are we alone? Good. Put on something comfortable...or draw the drapes to birth in your birthday suit.

I find this process works best with eyes closed, which may present a bit of a challenge. Rather than peeking after every step, you can do one of two things:

Choice 1: Skim the exercise through from beginning to end. It may feel like a lot to remember, but it's not really. The gist is

boldfaced. Skimming's a good choice for those who like to get a sense of what they're in for, though speaking as someone who forgot to play her carefully curated labor and delivery mixtape during the seven hours it took to push out Kid Number One, preparation should not be confused with control.

Choice 2: After completing each step, open your eyes, read the next step, close your eyes, perform step, rinse, repeat. A good choice for those who are game to flying blind, as well as those who have assembled enough Ikea furniture to know they will freak if they don't re-check the instructions every few minutes.

Either way, you'll find a star separating each step, and each step begins by taking 20 breaths and should be performed with eyes closed.

Ready or not, here we go.

Begin by standing with your eyes closed, arms at your sides, feet a comfortable distance apart.



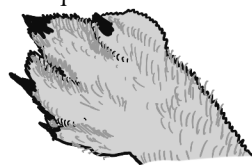
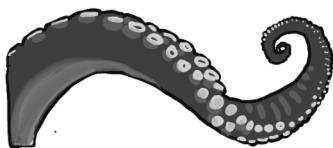
Take 20 breaths. In through the nose out through the mouth.



SLOWLY scan up your body, beginning with your feet and ankles. Your feet and ankles are the most important part, but we will repeat this step with other parts of your body.



Observe your feet. If they are transforming, how are they transforming? Are they staying the same size or growing small and hoof-like? Are your toes elongating like a wolf's? Are they closer to tentacles? Something else? Without shifting position, believe that these feet are your feet. When you are ready, move up.



Take 20 breaths and observe your legs. If they are transforming, how are they transforming? Are they growing longer? Heavier? Lighter? Hollow? Something else? Bend your knees, if you have them. Those knees are your knees. When you are ready, move up.



Take 20 breaths and observe your hips, groin, butt and abdomen. If they are transforming, how are they transforming? Breathe into them. They are yours now. When you are ready, move up.



Take 20 breaths and observe your chest, ribs and back. If they are transforming, how are they transforming? Is your chest expanding or contracting? Are your muscles reforming? Is something growing out of your back? This is your body, continuing to evolve. When you are ready, move up.



Take 20 breaths and observe your hands and arms. If they are transforming, how are they transforming? Are they turning into wings? Claws? Metal? Something else? Reach up. Then let them fall back to your sides. Keep these arms. When you are ready, move out to your skin.



Take 20 breaths and observe your skin. Can it still be described as skin? Is it smooth, dry, rough, moist? Feathers? Fur? Something else? This is what's covering your body now. When you are ready, move out up to your face



Take 20 breaths and observe your face. Going slowly, scan every feature individually, beginning with your lips, tongue, and teeth. Are they lengthening? Receding? Something else? Move your jaws. Stick out your tongue. Bite the inside of your cheeks. When you are ready, **move up to your nose.**



Has your nose changed shape? Has it become more sensitive? Will you rely on it more? When you are ready, **move up to your eyes.**



Open your eyes. Take twenty breaths while calmly gazing around you. Look up. Look down. You may be seeing something that does not exist. Whatever you see is as real as the room in which you are standing. Take it in.



Now take some steps. If you no longer take steps, slither. Creep. Crawl. **However you move, move.**



When you have gotten the hang of moving this way, **try moving more boldly.** Bigger...faster...more sinuously. Whatever your bodily situation wants you to do.



Come to a rest. Take 20 breaths.



Make a quiet sound with your mouth. Make it again. One more time. Then make a louder, longer version of it. **Let it grow into whatever it wants to grow into.**



Move around making your sound. Explore your environment. It is okay if you no longer experience the things in it as familiar objects. If your new form tells you to smell or taste the objects you encounter, do.



Come to a final rest. You have earned it. Seek whatever position is most comfortable for the being you have morphed into. Choose a spot where this being feels safe. Close your eyes. Rest. Take 20 breaths. Stay in this position as long as you like.



When you are ready, come back into the body you started with. Wiggle your fingers. Wiggle your toes. **Open your eyes.**

You've birthed something. You'll find out what later.



Sit up. Grope your way toward a pen. Try to avoid breaking for the bathroom or a snack. You've made it this far. Allow yourself to reflect on the experience while your body's still got skin (or feathers or fur) in the game.

Reflect in images, words, fragments, full sentences...whatever seems right in this moment.

Just a few more questions, then you are homefree, I swear.

What color best captures the experience?

What sound best captures the experience?

What scent best captures the experience?

What flavor best captures the experience?

What noun would you attach to this experience?

What verb would you attach to this experience?

If there is a lyric, phrase or name that you'd best write down before you forget, **DO IT NOW!**

Congratulations. You have birthed a beautiful baby. What will they do next, I wonder.

Was My Face Red

Once upon a time, in a magazine aimed at teenage girls, there was a crowdsourced feature called “Was My Face Red” in which readers shared humiliating episodes from their own lives. Y’know, like, “My classmates elected me Prom Queen, then dumped a bucket of pig’s blood over my head.”

Kidding. The letters that got picked for publication were at most mildly embarrassing, which did not make me feel particularly seen.

Think about some humiliating moments in your own life. So many to choose from, I know.

Jot some of them below. No need for details, just enough of a placeholder so that you remember what it’s referring to. Use initials if you’re worried that this book might fall into the wrong hands. Aim for five to eight.



Good. Take a deep breath.

Now, cross out any you have crafted into amusing, oft-told anecdotes.

Cross out any that are part of your public identity.

Cross out any that seem best explored with the help of a professional therapist.

Got any left? If not, back to the well. If “humiliating” is triggering for you, replace it with a workable synonym. Mortifying, perhaps. Embarrassing.

Remember that sometimes these moments are inflicted by outside forces, and sometimes we’re the agents of our own humiliation. Often, it’s a little of both, with a side of situation.

Got one? Good.

Get ready to write it out.

Or storyboard it.

If you want to go about it in a musical way, pour it out as an impromptu recitative.

Set the scene. Tell who was there. Where it took place. What you were wearing. All the specifics you can remember.

Specifics bring the scene back to life, and also make good flotation devices. Hang onto them to avoid getting sucked down to the depths where the anglerfish lurk.

I reckon a page and a half should be enough. If that’s more than enough, stop whenever you reach the end of the humiliating episode. If you need more paper than allotted, that’s fine too. Take it off site.

Was My Face Red...

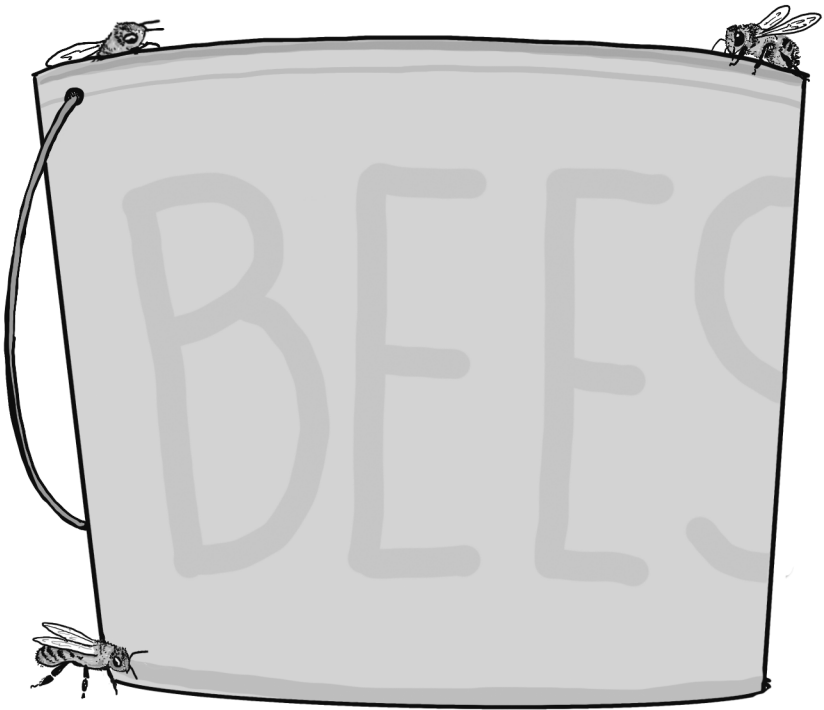
Was My Face Red (cont'd)

When you're done, you're done. Shake it off. Go for a walk. Have a snack. Play with the dog. Experience the relief of knowing that you won't wind up published in *Young Miss*.

You are cleared to consider this assignment fulfilled. Feel free to draw on it in some future creative project.

Or you could go for what's behind Curtain Number Two. That's where we subvert history, by employing some supernatural invention. Alter the outcome with the well-timed introduction of a giant rampaging lizard. A robot run amok. A team of Martian research scientists. No doubt you're familiar with the concept of sharknado. One of those would alter the path of history pretty good...

Behold! A bucket of bees should you wish to unleash them. 98% of them are invisible because I wanted to leave room for options of your own devising. Get creative!



My goodness, what a menacing stew you've stirred up in that bucket. Imagine the effect each element would have on the course of the original anecdote. Don't just imagine it. Pick one or two and have yourself a catharsis! Your face will never be red again, at least not in relation to this particular episode. I find this development highly relatable.

~~Was My Face Red~~

~~Was My Face Red (cont'd)~~



ANOTHER CHECK IN

This seems like a good time to check back in.

How'd you fare with this latest round of exercises?

Was there one you thought you'd love that you wound up hating?

Was there one you thought you'd hate that you wound up loving?

Did you discover something with legs?

Here are a couple of pages for your reflecting pleasure.

Dear Diary,

PRIVATE!!



KEEP OUT!

PRODUCE STAND

Small potatoes who seek to share their work beyond their immediate circle need to generate a bit of promotional hustle.

It can be wearying; nerve wracking . . . depressing even.

Those who raised you may have given you the idea that it's unseemly to honk your own horn. There's always some dumb ayuss professional poo-pooing any DIY effort as the mark of an amateur. There's so much time and labor involved, that even those of us who enjoy the thrill of the hunt have times where we envy the big bananas who get to contract this stuff out. The sunny side of this is *you* get to be the messenger. There's no marketing team diluting your vision and vibe. Make it fun for yourself, and I guarantee some folks will respond in kind.

Authenticity is free for the likes of us.

Aren't you glad?



Brand Identity

Ick. I can't believe I just wrote that. Swish and spit.

Then subvert from within and make yourself a fckn logo!

If you're breaking out in corporate hives, pretend you're designing a tattoo.

What do you make or do, creatively?

What creative attributes do you possess?

What are 10 nouns that could represent you and your creative empire?

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

Heck yeah!

Circle the 3 you like best.

Prowl around looking for images that combine these nouns with the energy you wish to represent your creative work.

A good way to steer clear of blatantly ripping off someone else's work is to go image hunting in the public domain. If you're aiming

for a vintage vibe, try adding the words “vintage” “etching” or “engraving” to your search.

So many museums, libraries, universities, and other cultural institutions have made high-res images from their collections available for free downloads. More often than not, you’re free to modify them as you see fit. What’s next? Complimentary admission and free tampons in every restroom?

Gather the images you like. Identify the front runner. Create an original image in this spirit. If you’re like, “How many times do I have to tell you, visual arts aren’t my thing!” enlist a friend, a student, or someone willing to barter or accept whatever pittance you can scrape together to thank them.

Or take an afternoon to acquaint yourself with the gloriously easy-to-master, free-to-use design site that is Canva (may it never shift to a subscription model or disappear overnight.)



Here are the steps I used to create Theater of the Apes’ logo:

- Look at dozens of photos of chimpanzees
- Narrow them down. Pick the one with a Creative Commons license
- Download the photo, then bump everything to the max, a technique I learned from a pal who makes stencils—exposure, contrast, highlights, and shadows.
- Erase the background and some extraneous bits and bobs, like the chimpanzee’s neck.

If you’re into abstraction, bust your chosen image down to its geometric components. If the vibe gets a bit insurance company, add some wheels or antennae. Now get that tattoo!

Calling Card

I was really psyched the first time an employer considered me worthy of personalized business cards. The thrill had yet to wear off when I was let go for using company equipment and time to bang out material for the late night, low budget show that was my truer calling.

I was as indignant as I was guilty, but cheered up when I realized I could order my own damn business cards! I would need them to hand out to potential clients when I graduated from massage school a few months later. I resolved that these cards would communicate something about my personality, in addition to my name and contact information. Mission accomplished.



And still a couple of dinguses expected happy endings! Read the card and you'll know how to read the room, dude.

Are business cards really necessary in our increasingly digital world?

No, but on the other hand, why not?

Drop a card in the fishbowl on the counter and you may wind up winning a free dinner!

Help interested strangers and lubricated party guests remember who recommended the books, exhibits, films, authors, and dive bars scribbled on the back. (This assumes that you're open to follow-up. If not, go with a napkin.)

What if kismet throws a friendly big banana in your path, who seems genuinely excited by the small potatoes prospect you're describing to them?

What if someone asks, "Hey, do you have a business card?"

Welcome the opportunity to assert your creative individuality in a sea of corporate anonymity. Beware of existing templates. There is no existing template for who you are. Always start with the blank one. You may want some representative text, in addition to your preferred modes of contact. Fill out the form, to help you discover what it is you want to share in this format. You need not subordinate yourself to straight-laced notions of what constitutes a title or company name. I am quite proud to have appointed myself Chief Primatologist (and Sole Employee) of *The East Village Inky*.

Name:

Title(s):

Company:

Website:


Phone:

Email:


Social Media:

Slogan/Philosophy:

Cross out anything you're not inclined to share with the world, so you can move on to picking out colors! Yay! Which one do you want? (And just for kicks, why?)



What font(s) are you favorably inclined towards? Again, forget about corporate best practices. If you want your card to look like the work of a chainsaw wielding maniac or Surabaya Johnny, that is your business! If you don't know actual font names, use descriptive placeholders like "slasher film" or "old timey sailor tattoo" that you can type into the internet after the phrase "What is the font that looks like a(n)."



Perfect. The next best thing to hand lettering! If you're not convinced, check the independent archive of typography, Fonts in Use, to get a feel for what else is possible.

Now it's time to get graphic! If you have an pre-existing logo, you probably already have an existing business card.

If you've had a logo for all of five minutes, having just completed the previous exercise, a business card is a perfect place to trot it out. Have fun making decisions about size and placement.

All set? Wahoo! Get those suckers printed. Ask friends with snazzy looking cards who their preferred online vendors are.

If you have no friends with snazzy looking cards, congratulations. You're the pioneer who others will soon be turning to. Read customer reviews and take an informed plunge, but first, root around for discount codes.

Dollars to doughnuts, they'll give you another discount code as a reward for placing your first order, so it may make sense to start with a small amount to make sure you're happy with the result, then double down when you need more.



Business cards, like underwear, should be changed annually.

Stickiness

Somewhere amid your prodigious output is an image or a sentence that would make for an intriguing bit of street art.



Create a sticker emblazoned with this image or phrase. (You visual artists already know this, but if you're making a digital file to be printed as a color sticker, or color anything, make sure you set the color mode or color profile of your file to CMYK from the get go. A quick internet search will reveal why.)

I'm partial to 2x2" squares because that size pops nicely from even the most graffiti-strewn NYC doorways, especially if you incorporate some negative space and render all text as bold sans serif all caps. Treat yourself to a vast quantity of these from an online printer. 500. 1000. Smash those discount codes.

Don't leave home without 'em. The most lackluster errand gains a bit of adventure when you've got one of your stickers burning a hole in your pocket.

Visit them. Is the one on the traffic median still up? How about that grungy bathroom stall at the club?

Festoon your bike, your laptop, your instrument case. Take them with you when you travel. Give them out like party favors at events, or ship them out as a surprise gift with every order you receive.

Document them for posterity. Let it be known that you're also thrilled to receive pictures from others who've spotted them or seeded them in the wild. Assemble an album of this evidence.

If you're feeling particularly feisty, omit your project's title, your website, anything that feels like advertising.

Flying uncredited may seem counterintuitive, but why should Banksy have all the fun? Be like Shepard Fairey (and Martin Heidegger). Let things manifest themselves.

Subconsciously tether a wider audience to your work. Include a tiny hashtag if you want, so you can peer in on them trying to hash out wtf it means.



Create a mysterious sticker campaign for a small potato you admire.



Wearable Merch

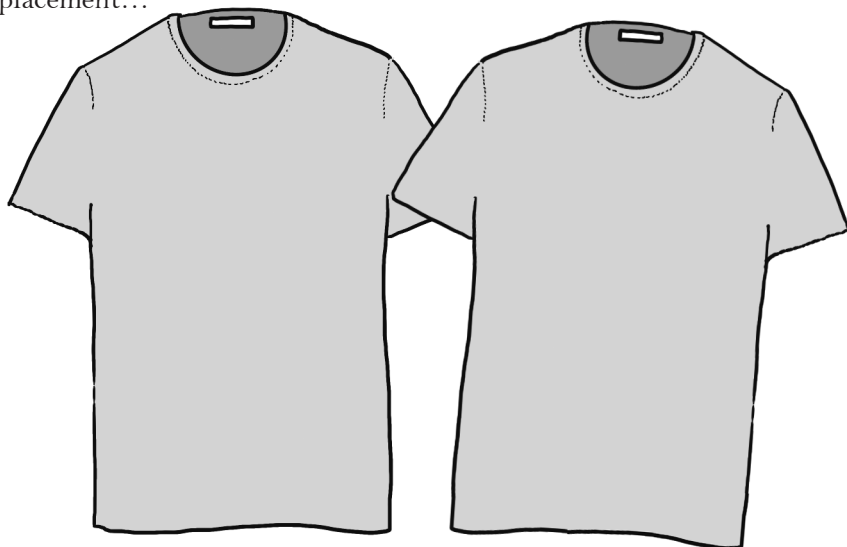
You should absolutely make T-shirts for your projects.

At the very least, make one to wear yourself.

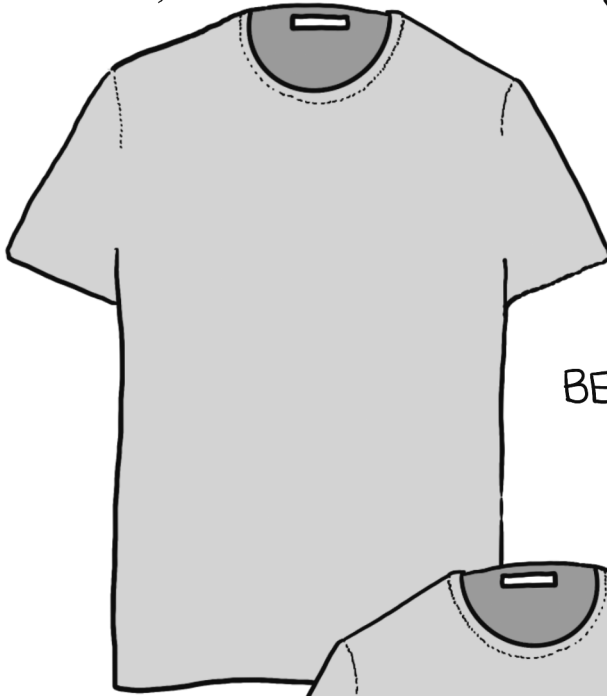
In the words of a *Creative, Not Famous* contributor (who ironically chose to remain anonymous): Wearing our own merch emboldens people to engage with us outside of “working” hours.

You were given a torso for a reason—to spark conversation, identify fellow travelers, and remind yourself and the world of your creative contributions. Any small potato who willingly, or perhaps just unthinkingly, reps Old Navy or some athletic brand with theirs deserves a firm but gentle talking to. Use a print on demand service. Even if you’re the only one demanding such an item, it is worth the hour or so you’ll spend setting things up. Have no fear if this is your first such undertaking, and the visual arts are an unfamiliar realm. These outfits have tutorials for the likes of you, as does ol’ Ma Internet. Start typing “How do I..” into a search engine and before you know it, you’ll be removing backgrounds like a champ! I presume you’ve already started messing around on Canva.

Here are some T-shirts. Experiment with designs, text, placement...



After you have successfully completed your first t-shirt, you can graduate to the other bazillion items these print on demand companies make available to small potato merch kingpins such as ourselves. Ridiculous! Circle any that appeal.



YOGA MAT!

SHOWER
CURTAIN!

THONG,
PANTIES!

BEACH TOWEL!

STADIUM
BLANKET!

ONESIE!

BIKE
SHORTS!

PHONE CASE!

FANNY PACK!

WATER BOTTLE!

SPORTS BRA!

BATHING
SUIT!

DOG
COAT!



Linguistics

My anti-authoritarian streak makes it difficult to abide by certain stodgy customs when interacting with editors, grant committees, and other gatekeepers. It puts me at a disadvantage with that realm's majority.

On the flipside, it puts me at an extreme advantage when talking about my zine to the people who might actually “get” the thing. I’ve spent years cobbling together my own idiosyncratic project-specific vocabulary I use for promotions, interviews, correspondence, and processing transactions. It’s a bit embarrassing how much pleasure I take in abiding by my tacit style sheet.

I’ve already told you that I refer to myself as “Chief Primatologist (and Sole Employee).” Prior to that, I was

Chief Laundry Officer

Any booboo is held up for examination and hailed as

a Hallmark of EAST VILLAGE INKY Quality

My zine is a one-woman operation, but I get off on pretending that anything related to shipping is handled by

**Ex-Circulation Manager
Jambo (1991–2007)**



No doubt people who are just joining us are confused. I should probably include an FAQ on my website and Etsy shop for their benefit. Though I’d hate to deprive long time readers the pleasure of getting the references in these willful obscurities, and new readers keep joining up, so... My *Inky*-specific vocab is organic and cumulative—it’s not like the creative team came up with them in a strategy session.

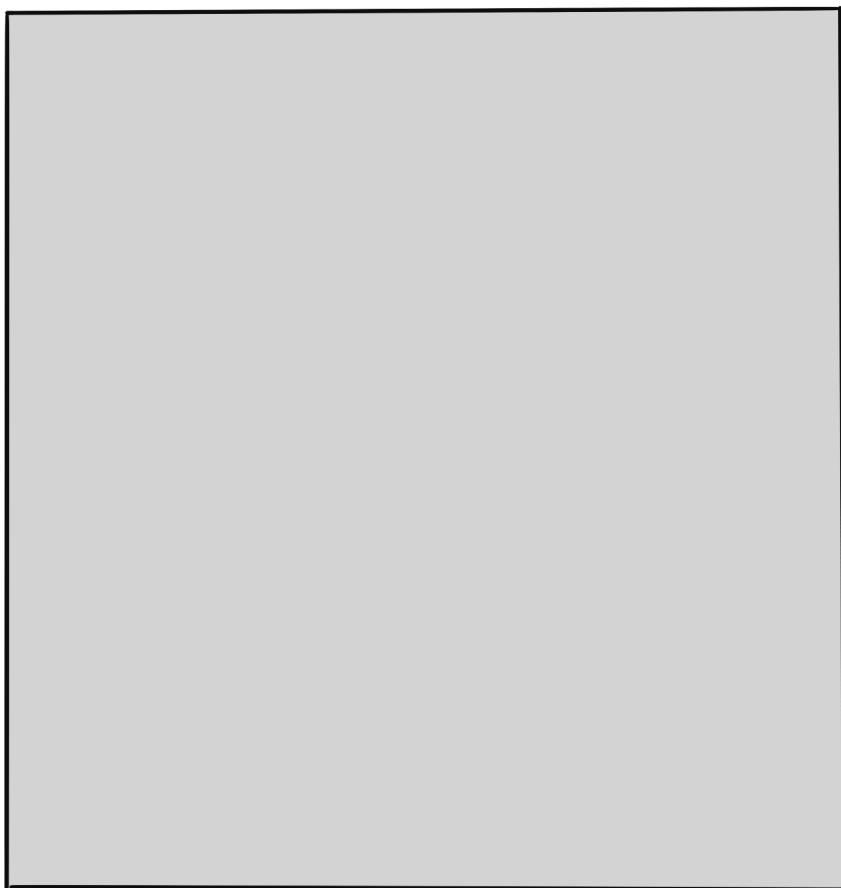
Though it’s fun to dream about what such a session might have looked like. My only real reference points are *Mad Men*, an animated female network exec on *The Simpsons*, and the time my playwright husband was temping at an ad agency, and one of the creatives invited

him to spitball slogans for a line of fat-free cookies and snack cakes.
His contribution?

~~Shakespeare~~ knows chocolate like
a motherfucker.

Madison Avenue may not appreciate this sort of cheek, but I hope you will bring a similarly brazen confidence to any project specific vocabulary you devise.

Communicate what you're doing in language authentic to the spirit of your thing!



Unconventional Venues

The phrase “thinking outside the box” feels rather co-opted by the box these days, but the urge to do so remains righteous.

If you’re having trouble getting your work presented in traditional venues, or—gasp—don’t want your work to be presented in traditional venues for whatever reason, there are other options worth exploring. In fact, let’s really travel outside the box by having you dutifully fill in ALL the boxes below, as if you are one of those Renaissance quadruple threats who knows how to do everything. Trying on all the hats may yield some options that wouldn’t have occurred had you stayed in your lane.

You are a visual artist. What are some places where your artwork could be presented to the public?

1. A gallery (maybe)
2. Your local laundromat
3. Every street sign for 3 blocks
4. A shop window
- 5.
- 6.

You are a musician. What are some places where you perform a set of your original songs?

1. The hottest club in town (maybe)
2. Your local farmer’s market
3. A borrowed porch
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

You are a theatermaker / puppeteer / dancer / comedian / clown.
Where can you put on a show?

1. Broadway! (Keep chasin' that rainbow, kid...)
2. Under a bridge
3. A local church in desperate need of revenue
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.



You are a writer. Where can you give a public reading of your work?

1. Whatever bookstore David Sedaris reads his work in
2. That cafe that opened last month
3. The subway
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

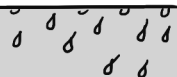
And just to ensure that this sundae isn't deprived of its traditional cherry, what would be the stupidest, most hilarious place that could host the fruits of your creative labors?

Oh, that would be so awesome. Please do it. Don't let *me* railroad you into anything though. Look over all the possibilities above and circle the one that excites you more than it scares you, that's either just nutty enough to work, or sane enough to seem viable.

The venue will determine the next steps to be taken:

- Will I need to get a permit? ☐ Y ☐ N ☐ maybe
- Will I need official permission from an owner or manager? ☐ Y ☐ N
- Do I already have an "in"? ☐ Y ☐ N (if yes, who) 
- _____
- Will I need insurance? ☐ Y ☐ N ☐ Not sure
- Will money change hands? ☐ Y ☐ N (if so, how) 
- _____

Am I screwed if it rains? ☐ Y ☐ N



Convince a skeptical manager or business owner that this is a SUPER idea:

Will you need to bring in outside helpers before, during and/or after the event? ☐ Y ☐ N

How will you compensate helpers for their time?

What do you need? Chairs? A mic? What do you hope the venue will provide (for free)?

What can you borrow from friends or provide yourself?

Do you need to borrow or rent a van? ☐ Y ☐ N

What's your budget? 0 to _____

Date on which to set this ball in motion _____

Little Freebie

I love Little Free Libraries, and for that matter, community fridges, swap shops, and little free pantries.

Alas, it's not uncommon for them to become victims of neglect. It's a special brand of depressing to open the door to a Little Free Library and find its only contents are garbage and a waterlogged Harlequin Romance with its cover torn off.

They are labors of love, and as such, require upkeep.

Do you have it in you to make and maintain such a gift to the community?

Artists could host a little free gallery or a little free materials exchange.

Performers and musicians, a little free stage with a regular schedule of events.

What about a little free pantry that has a dedicated shelf stocked with free zines and mini comics? Want to get really fancy? Initiate a shelf-stable monthly theme and invite any interested small potato to donate work—and food—related to each month's theme. I would read any number of zines and mini-comics about beans, a solid source of nutrition which fall well within range of the average zinester's purse. Remind all participants that you'd welcome the donation of a couple of cans along with their work.

The crucial thing is to come up with a concept you yourself love enough to contribute considerable volunteer labor to on an ongoing basis. Decorating a stolen honor box with cute signage and parking it near the curb is not enough!

What Little Free Enterprise might you share with your community? Fantasy's the first step on the road to reality. Write it down.

Given all the work you'll be putting in, don't be shy about giving it a name that harkens to one of your projects or other creative work. Let people know there's a connection. Why should corrupt 19th-century industrialists hold the monopoly on name checking themselves when founding institutions for the public good? Stake a claim below:



My goodness, that is a very promising name for something that began life as a secondhand china cabinet, an old wine crate, a beat-up dollhouse someone left out for trash collection, or something else I invite you to write below:



Speaking of which, where will this fine institution be located?



What sort of items (or performances or services) might be found therein?



How will you communicate the nature of items you are seeking to stock or services you will offer to potential collaborators and donors?



How will you communicate the nature of this mission to confused first time visitors who need reassurance that they are truly free to help themselves?

Who are your ideal comrades in this enterprise?

What duties are related to its upkeep?

What problems might you encounter?

Will you invite the community to give feedback? If so, by what methods?

If and when you embark on this undertaking, don't become so overwhelmed that you neglect to document its founding and daily doings in photos, journal entries, and frequent inventories of the contents. And don't forget to pat yourself on the back now and then. You're a credit to your community.

Uplifting

One of my heroes is the Idaho 8-year-old who smuggled his sole copy of *The Adventures of Dillon Helbig's Crismis*, an 81-page handwritten, illustrated book, onto a shelf of his local public library. I also applaud the librarians who supported his ambition by relocating it to the graphic novel section and adding it to the circulating catalog. The second reporters and newscasters got wind of this story, a star was born. A heartwarming counterbalance to the pandemic and politics, but also, way to get the major publishers embroiled in a bidding war over reprint rights to your first novel, kid! I hear he signed a contract for a follow up, too.

It's really only a story because he's 8. There's a rich and longstanding tradition of self-publishers "uplifting" their books and zines to stores and libraries. Think of it as shoplifting in reverse.

If no one's lowering the drawbridge for you, it's up to you to sneak around back, pole vault your way across the moat, shinny up the drain pipe, and gain entry via an unguarded window.

What happens next?

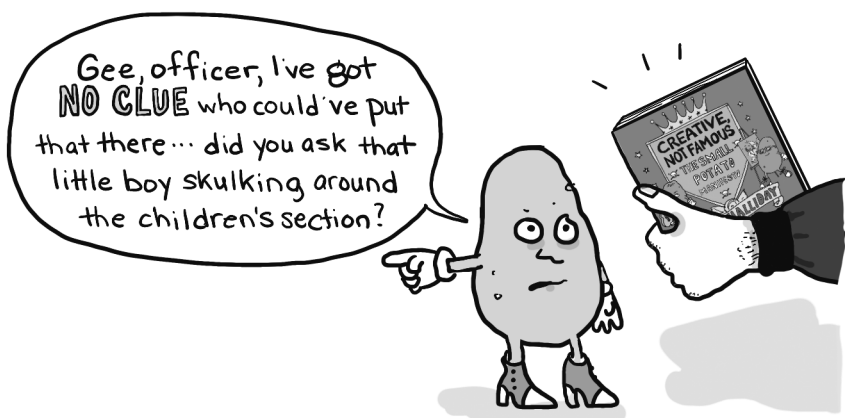
Probably not the traditional Hollywood ending. Little Dillon Helbig already claimed that for "hissself." (*The New York Times* noted that he also pronounces library "liberry." Aww. Don't you go trying that.)

For you, the fun lies in dreaming about a fellow traveler discovering your work.

What IS this?
How did it get here?
Is there more?



Perhaps you would not be amiss to include some method by which an interested party could discover the face behind the mask of this carefully planted mystery.



Bookstores seem to be the primary targets of uplifting, but the shenanigans needn't be limited to those of us whose work is text-based.

That's why museum gift shops have postcards for sale! Artists, make sure you are represented by uplifting a card, or five.

Try on a few T-shirts, then return them to the shelf, considerably re-folded, along with one of your own making.

Ever wonder why vinyl is making a comeback? It's so small potato musicians can uplift their albums! Give collectors the momentary thrill of thinking they've stumbled on an overlooked 70s gem by uplifting the album whose cover features a sun-dappled photo of you in a poet's smock, a chain of wildflowers adorning your cream-rinsed locks.

Gimme the names of three establishments where the general public will soon be able to stumble on your work, even though technically, they're not supposed to.

1.
2.
3.

Commemorative Tableaux

Were I to hazard a guess, I'd wager your long-running project is a quixotic labor of love, with laughably small financial returns.

It's also a gigantic melonfarming achievement, whose history deserves to be commemorated.

Hopefully, you've got some relevant flotsam and jetsam squirreled away for your biographer or the admiring big banana who'll eventually profile you in the Sunday magazine section, but while we're waiting for *that* ship to come in, there's no time like the present to honor your project's journey in epic fashion.

PROLOGUE: What were you doing before the project entered your life? Where were you? Who else was around?

THE EUREKA MOMENT: What was the inspiration for this project?

EARLY LABOR: How did you bring this project to fruition?

INITIAL RECEPTION: How was your project received early on?

OBSTACLES: What challenges did you face?

RESILIENCE: How did you overcome those challenges?

APOSTLES: Who aided you on this journey?

RECOGNITION: What are some notable high points?

EVOLUTION: How has this project morphed over its existence?

THE FUTURE: Where is your project going?

♥ WILD CARD: A favorite memory of your project:

♣ WILD CARD: An embarrassing memory of your project:

♦ WILD CARD: Another memory. Your choice.

What are you supposed to do with all the information you just generated? I'm sure you have some ideas, but permit me to pitch you on another.

Grab some costumes and props, and enlist some friends to portray great moments in your project's history in a series of photographs. (Yes, I did this for a 9th grade Shakespeare assignment and I got an A, thank you very much.) If your project is suitable for all ages, go Bugsy Malone and cast children in these tableaux. I guarantee that at least 80% of them will be into it.

Reward your volunteers with a decent spread of snacks. Anticipate that at least one of them will bail with very little notice, and don't pitch a fit when this happens. Remain calm and be prepared to lead when everyone's looking at you like, "Whadda we do?" Show them that you respect their time by doing advance preparation.

Make a shot list, based on the milestones identified above. Use the margins and any unused space to note costumes, props, location, how many players you'll need. If you have specific friends in mind for specific parts (including playing themselves) jot their names. After you've nailed down these considerations, I'm all for sloppy approximations and hamming things up. Take inspiration from silent film and massive canvases depicting scenes from the Bible, ancient Rome, and Greek mythology.



if you dispense with modern dress. Give in to the bombast by wrapping your friends in bedsheet togas and 99¢ store laurels.

After you've got your shots, thank the participants lavishly, and sequester yourself until you've come up with a descriptive caption for each image.

Publish them as a zine, or present an educational slideshow on your magnificent history.

Don't forget to credit everyone who helped you, and the people who played them in these tableaux.

Bad Review Redo

It sucks to be on the receiving end of a bad review.

Well-meaning friends will try to console you that a bad review's just one person's opinion. Unfortunately, that person is equipped with a bullhorn, be it Yelp, YouTube or *The New York fckn Times*. Generally speaking, I'd advise against issuing a bullet-pointed rejoinder to every snarky, pig-headed review ... such attempts can backfire, though if you truly don't give a fuck, pry the exhaust pipe off and let 'er rip!

The rest of us can cheer ourselves up with private, unauthorized revisions.

It's a bit of a brat move, but who cares? You know what's *really* bratty? Clobbering a hard working small potato's creative efforts with a scathing public review.

I suggest getting the hang of this exercise on the bunny slopes of others' bad reviews, rather than your own. Put yourself in service to a small potato of your acquaintance who's been unjustly skewered.

Alternatively, you could search the internet for "worst _____ reviews of all time," plugging the art form of your choice into the blank.

When the results are returned, steer clear of Dorothy Parker. She elevated shitty reviews to a barbarous art form. Believe me, you do not want to be the Viper to her Mountain. She'll mop the floor with you from beyond the grave!

↗ gratuitous GAME OF THRONES reference

Wait, I know! How about you toddle over to Amazon and browse through some dyspeptic customer assessments of my books? Here's one of the milder ones.

I was very disappointed! I was hoping this book would be funny and entertaining but it wasn't. It was either boring or stressful, but not funny! I couldn't finish it and ended up donating it to some random library I found while vacationing in Europe. Don't waste your money! Poor story-telling, and no humor!

What can I say? It's always a relief to find someone who enjoys using exclamation points as much as I do.

I'm also all a-slobber, thinking of the reverse hatchet job you and your pen are soon to set in motion. How can you tell which words to cross out and which to keep? Easy! Sort them into the chart below.

FEEL GOOD 😊	FEEL BAD ☹️

With a bit of judicious pruning, a stinker such as this can be repackaged as a ringing endorsement:

very funny and entertaining !!!

Now you have a go. Turn the page and use your pen to hack free the positive outcome imprisoned therein. Don't worry about punctuation. Permission granted to add your own! Move words around if that helps to achieve the goal. Cross out extraneous letters to form new words! It's a very short leap from "boring and stressful" to "boss!"

(Told you I love exclamation points.)

Have at it.

I was very disappointed! I was hoping this book would be funny and entertaining but it wasn't. It was either boring or stressful, but not funny! I couldn't finish it and ended up donating it to some random library I found while vacationing in Europe. Don't waste your money! Poor story-telling, and no humor!

Write your clean copy below:

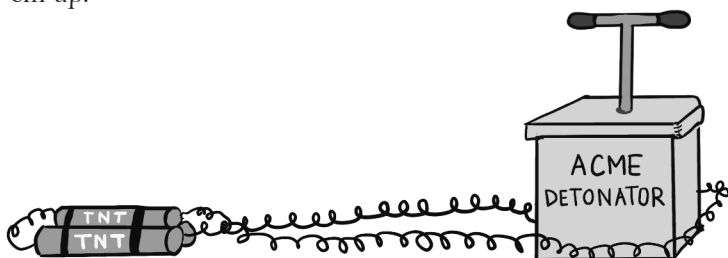


HAHAHAH, I love you!!! Thank you for depriving a hater of the last word, without doing them the discourtesy of suggesting they were just jealous.

Amuse yourself by turning other such sour grapes into sweet, sweet wine.

When it comes time to defuse some venomous reviews of your own work, you'll be a top notch sapper!

Blow 'em up!



Bad Review Redo II

As big as I am on expressing gratitude to every Friend of the Small Potato who goes out of their way to pay my work a compliment, privately or publicly, I'm also a big believer in going out of *my* way to "thank" those who thought they could get away with talking shit about me. I freely admit this is not what Michelle Obama meant when she talked about "going high."

Look, everyone's entitled to an opinion, but sometimes things get a bit personal. Drag my kids into it, suggest that I'm an ugly American whose only interest is getting high in foreign countries and I WILL go medieval on you with a public thank you note! Whether delivered as a letter to the editor or posted as a reply to an online comment, these small courtesies are an act of resistance that snatches the power from a baddie who thought they'd given themselves the upper hand. And everyone who sees it will know who's boss.k

Wait, isn't it better to let such things roll off your back? Yeah, maybe . . . if you're Beyoncé. As a small potato, I have the luxury of providing a more boutique experience. I'm not so stupid I can't tell when a "review" is really an *Apocalypse Now*-style blanket party.

My scrupulously worded thank you notes are the concealed soap in my socks.

I'm taking the liberty of sharing my basic outline on the next page, in the event you know some assholes who would benefit from a karma boomerang.



Dear _____ ,
(insert name or online handle)

Thank you so much for going out of
your way to share your thoughts on my

(insert project name)

Your thoughtfulness was doubly
appreciated on a day when

(example: we put our 14 year old cat to sleep.)

Again, thanks for writing. I hope you
have a great week/weekend! Best of luck
with _____!
(example: Your Sunday school class)

Your pal, *Aryn Hallidee*



A beautiful benefit of this practice is how much more sincere it will make your actual thank you notes. I use “daymaking” interchangeably. I get more use out of it than any little black dress.



Do not send until you are absolutely certain your response would pass muster with Elizabeth Post, etiquette maven Emily Post’s midcentury successor. Butter should not melt in your mouth. Also, avoid home addresses. We don’t want a felony on our hands.

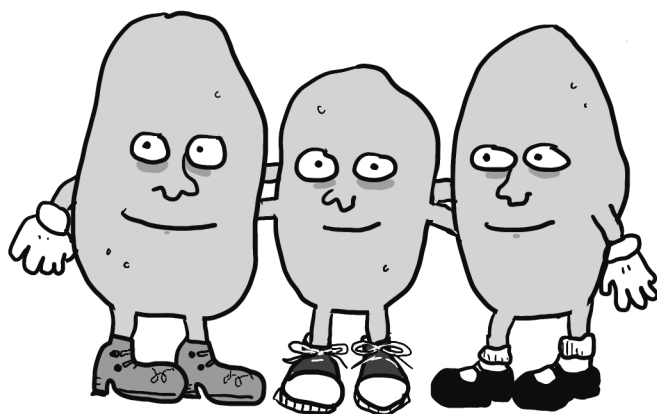
POTATO PATCH

Community is a very fertile proposition and no small part of the Small Potato Manifesto.

I'm talking the sort of deeply rooted connections that are a source of nutrition and a good bet for weathering any storm. Community is richest if we can respect our oldest hands while simultaneously welcoming new growth.

Every group activity has the potential to build a bit of community. The ones in this section are super strong compost.

Nurture your fellow small potatoes!



The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

So many people struggle with holiday blues. Seems like the best remedy might be a holiday of one's own invention.

Why not? We can all do with a bit more festivity, remembrance, and days off.

Holidays are different when you get to invent the traditions, manage expectations, and decide how public the celebration should get.

Who or what will your holiday celebrate? (If you're unsure, leave this space blank for now.)

If you know what you're celebrating, it probably makes sense to tie it to a specific date—a birthday, an historic event, or seasonal highlight.

For instance, Bloomsday is celebrated annually on the day James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* takes place.

A friend of mine hatched Phil Collins Day the day after Valentine's Day. Every year, her observance of the loss, hurt, obsession, and degradation that are also a part of love grew more elaborate. Eventually, there was a parade with floats. Singles loved it.

If you're not sure what to celebrate, pick something that won't inconvenience you. Speaking for myself, the last thing I need is another holiday in that gridlocked corridor between Thanksgiving and Three Kings Day. I would, however, welcome some festivity toward the barren end of February.

When's a good time for your holiday to take place?

Sounds like a date to me!

If you have yet to nail down what your holiday's in celebration of, now's the time to perform a few strategic searches. Wikipedia can provide you with a comprehensive list of who was born or died on any given date. Britannica has a pretty good overview of "this day in history." I just learned that China's 8,000-strong life-sized terracotta army was discovered on my 9th birthday, by farmers digging a well. You can celebrate whichever one you prefer.

Having done your research and doubled back to fill in the blank, the fun can really start! Here's where we figure out how this wondrous occasion is to be celebrated.

Start by listing your favorite elements of any holiday you personally celebrate or have celebrated. Extra credit for anything that had faded to a distant memory by the time you reached adulthood.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Are there traditions here that could be retrofitted for your holiday? Throwing colored powders or overripe tomatoes? Hiding trinkets in cakes? Running hell for leather alongside a freaked out bull? Turn the page and gimme some modifications:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Sounds like you've got the makings of a memorable 5th year celebration. For now let's concentrate on what you think you can manage for the first year. You want this thing to grow organically, and to be more fun than stressful, which means starting small.

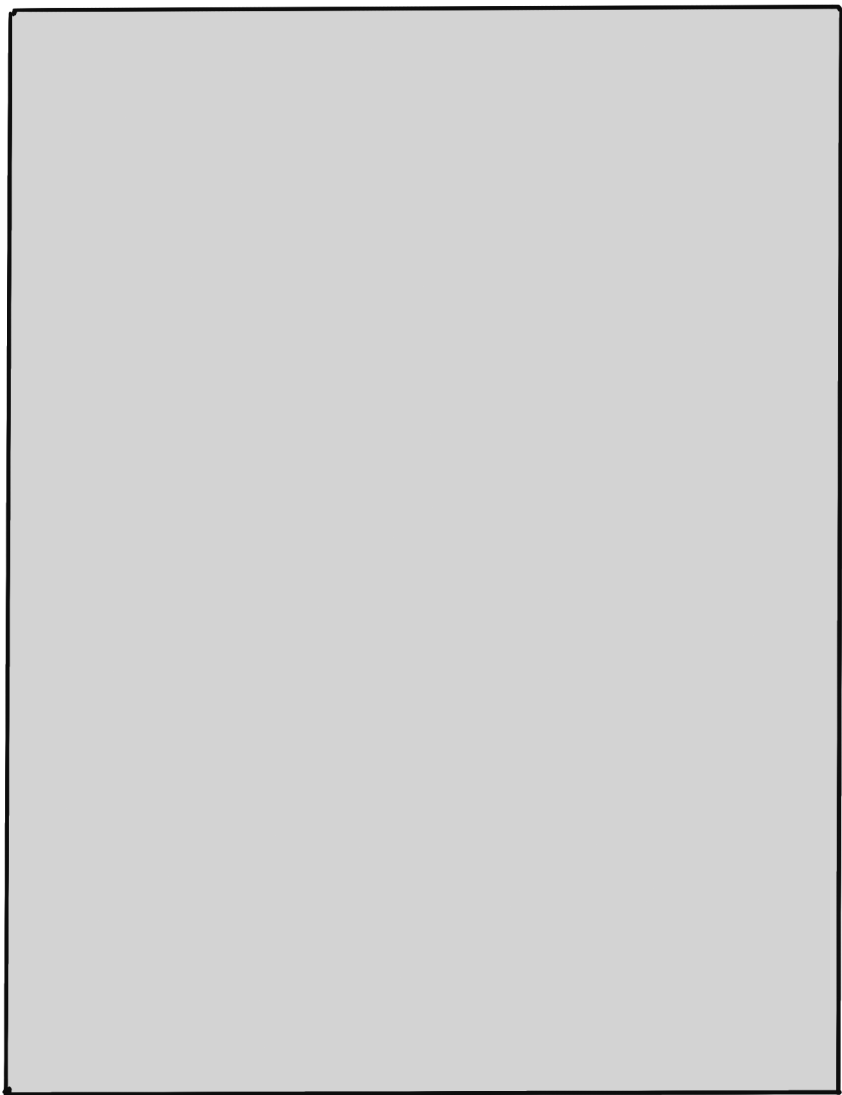
Circle the three most manageable seeming elements for the first annual observance.

Who are some likely co-conspirators? It doesn't have to be a giant party, but it helps to have a few enthusiastic merrymakers who can later say, "I've been part of this thing since the beginning."



People who feel like they're part of something can be counted on to help in significant, ongoing ways.

Take the next page to imagine how the first year's celebration might look. Who's there? What's for eats? What are you drinking? Are there communal activities? Decorations? Gifts? A ritual? Sketch it out in words or pictures.



That sounds . . . awesome. Let the good times roll! Be sure to give your guests and helpers enough notice to allow them to get in the spirit of the thing. They'll want sufficient time to ready their finery, do some advance reading, and plan their contribution.

If you find yourself experiencing a bit of stress-related pre-holiday jitters as the date draws night, remind yourself that you are inventing a wonderful new communal event. That's what I want to find at the end of my rainbows.

Fan Mail Before Epitaph

Not to be the bearer of bad tidings, but SPOILER! Everyone who's inspired you is going to die.

Odds are a few of them already have.

Howzabout you tell those who remain how much they matter to you while their neurons are still capable of processing this information? Such thoughtful expressions will likely mean more to your high school art teacher or a hardworking, relatively unhailed musician than some megawatt big banana, but hey, if connecting to a superstar now will curb operatic expressions of grief on social media when news of their death breaks, I'm all for it. I'm not saying I'm looking forward to their demise, but rest assured, if you write them a nice fan letter, and they send you a sweet, down-to-earth reply, I will be very glad to read about that interaction, right after I read their *New York Times* obit.

HERE ARE YOUR
PARAMETERS

- ☆ Handwritten
- ☆ Postcard length
- ☆ Ask nothing in return

If you can't find a physical mailing address, you may break the first rule, but the other two are ironclad.

Imagine that they are on their actual deathbed. Given the circumstances, your brevity will be received as a mercy, as will your restraint. Can you imagine hitting them up for a blurb or a letter of recommendation at a time like this? Tacky!

Who are 20 people who've inspired you—either by example, or with specific works or words of encouragement?

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 6. |
| 2. | 7. |
| 3. | 8. |
| 4. | 9. |
| 5. | 10. |

- | | |
|-----|-----|
| 11. | 16. |
| 12. | 17. |
| 13. | 18. |
| 14. | 19. |
| 15. | 20. |

Pick one (with the understanding that you'll try to hit all 20 before it's too late. Memento mori!)

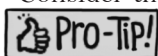
When did you become acquainted with their work?

How/why have they made an impact on you?

What's a specific memory you have of them or their work? If it involves a quote, by all means, cite it.

Complete this sentence: THANK YOU FOR...

Boom! That's plenty for a postcard. Pick a pretty one. You know I'm always coming up with excuses for you to treat yourself to a new pen. Consider this another one. You're welcome.



Take a photo of each postcard, front and back, before dropping it in the box. Your growing collection may reveal certain themes regarding what matters to you most.

Like a Vision She Dances

Did you decorate your binders with favorite lyrics when you were younger? Do you copy lines of poetry into your journal? Do your tattoos quote Shakespeare or Vonnegut? How lovely when words strike a chord.

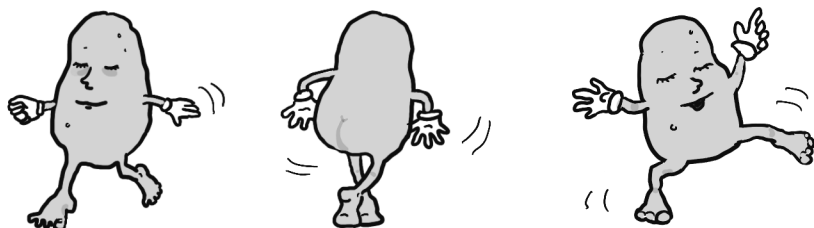
When I was a kid, someone gave me a packet of illustrated postcards by local artists. One showed a woman with long hair whirling out a screen door, barefoot. Underneath the image, the artist had written “Like a vision, she dances across the porch as the radio plays.”

Of all the cards, that was my favorite. It was a very appealing vision of adulthood. I had no idea who the woman was supposed to be... the artist? The artist’s girlfriend? The artist’s wife? I figured she must have been someone very special to have inspired such a strangely constructed sentence.

I nearly croaked a few years later, hearing Bruce Springsteen’s “Thunder Road” for the first time.

I wish I knew what became of that card. I treasured it for years, and can still see it in my mind’s eye. I’m guessing the artist was a Springsteen fan, but maybe that particular song spoke to them the way their card spoke to me. How lovely to be so moved by another’s words, you distill them into another sort of language.

I bet you’ve got hundreds of beloved lyrics and lines knocking around that beautiful brain of yours, but without stopping to agonize about which ones to choose, just give me 5 off the top of your head. They don’t have to be *in* your top five, just add up to five.



- Put a star beside every line whose author is living.
- Put a star beside every line whose visual possibilities are immediately apparent.
- Put a star beside the one you love best of the five.
- Give 3 bonus stars to any line authored by a small potato, i.e., someone far below Springsteen-level recognition.
- Then illustrate the lyric that got the most stars.

(If you feel your skills as a visual artist won't allow you to create something worthy enough, I will remind you that this is why the Muse gave us paper, scissors, and glue. Stage a photo. Nobody said this tribute had to involve pens or paint. In fact, perhaps your image could be a moving one. Set your tripod up at the far end of the porch, and dance across it like a vision.)

When you have created the image, find a way to get it to the person who came up with the line, by way of thanks for the pleasure their words have given you.

Bad Art Party

What's your feeling about parties?

I love them, once I get past my ridiculous, niggling doubts. What if I don't know anyone? Will I find someone to talk to? Will they ditch me at the first opportunity? Or, if hosting: Will my guests have a good time? What if they sit around like a bunch of duds? What if everyone cancels at the last minute?

The best remedy for these sorts of jitters is an activity.

Activities are ice breakers. I personally love charades, but that may be because of the aggressively competitive streak this game awakens in me. I realize not everyone has a degree in theater.

Another of my favorite ways to transform a bunch of tongue-tied strays into a jolly communal pack is a Bad Art Party.



It's also an excellent way to get rid of old magazines and all the stockpiled art & craft supplies you'll never get around to using up yourself.

Can you guess why we call it a *Bad* Art Party?



If you guessed "it takes the pressure off," you're right.

A child attendee once lobbied to make good art. I said okay, because tantrums have no place at my parties, and she was still little enough to believe anything she created would be good.

Her introverted father, however, threw himself at the task with gusto, attracting way more interest from his fellow partygoers than he would have if the party had been your average free form mingler.

That's the great thing about having a low stakes communal activity. The introverts can participate by disappearing into the creative zone, while the extroverts can show off to their heart's content. Everybody wins, especially if you've set it up to be a potluck. Talk about entertaining made easy!

Depending on the crowd you run with, the Bad Art mandate may result in an avalanche of penis-themed collage work, so think long and hard before inviting the kiddies, or make sure the magazine selection is all-ages appropriate.

Bad Art Parties are particularly welcome around holidays that tend to suck once you hit adulthood.

Valentine's Day? Some doilies, some red construction paper, and a bowl of Conversation Hearts will have your guest collaborating with monsters of the id.

New Year's Eve? Other than my birthday, I can't think of a better occasion for forcing your guests to wear their bad art on their heads. Give everybody the same base—an inverted paper dish with attached ribbons for securing their masterpieces under their chins. Photograph each creator modeling their creations. Have a catwalk.



Shower all creations with equally lavish praise, even if one participant's work stands head and shoulders above the rest. This is why everyone comes away from my variety show thinking they've either made or witnessed something great, that they were a part of something worthwhile. I crank the audience up into loud expressions of appreciation for every act. Not very New York-y, I know. What can I say? Once a Hoosier, always a Hoosier. I'm proud of myself for cultivating a positive communal culture.)

Nursery School

I like teaching kids. They never question my credentials and they give me good ideas about teaching adults.



Try it any time you're tasked with instructing a group or leading them through a particular course of action:

Kids don't want to sit through your 20-minute lecture on the history of the altered book (aka palimpsest, one of the greatest words in the English language.)

They want to seize one of the musty vocabulary primers you rescued from the Truro dump swap shop for your Altered Book Class, cut out a cute picture and pocket it, get glue in their hair, and bleat your name 20 times in 90 seconds.

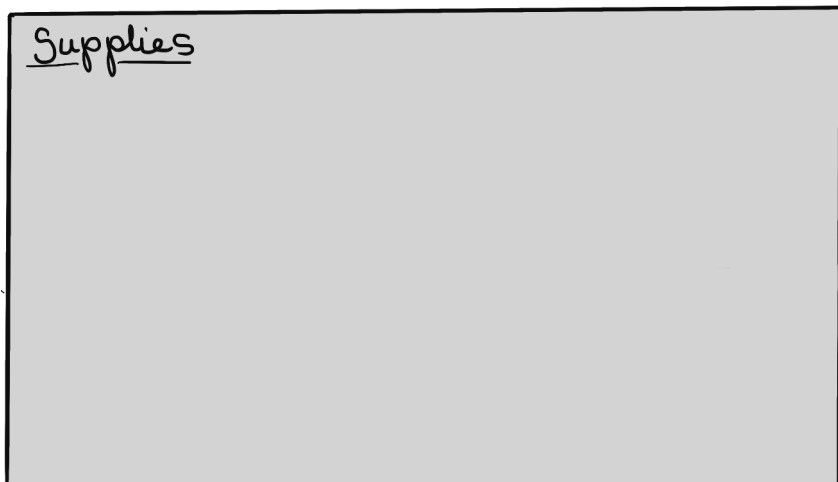
Gee, I'm really selling this, huh? I didn't say it would be relaxing, just that the participants will be engaged.

What's something you know how to make in an hour or less? It can be the easy version of something you would typically spend more time on.

Some ideas to get you started:

1. A one sheet mini comic
2. A parade headdress
3. Cookies
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

I'm going to give you two hours to teach a group of kids how to make one of those things. Choose wisely! Kidding, whatever you pick, you'll do fine, provided you break it down into logical, easy to grasp instructions, and make sure they can be hands-on right away. What supplies will you need? Assume you've got 4 kids jockeying for your attention and multiply by 4. Math!



Supplies

Review your supply list. Could you make the most of your two hours together by getting some prep work out of the way? I'm not saying do everything for the little nippers, just, if you give each of them a whole cabbage, a lot of class time will be lost to shredding, whereas if you give them the same cabbage, pre-shredded, creativity can flourish. Let them learn how to use a shredder on their own time.

Now that you've got a handle on the supply list, use the next page to take me through the step by step process of making your thing.

Be clear, because I am jacked up and raring to go. If you wander off into the weeds, I will spill something and/or race ahead, my impatience leading me to cause irreparable damage to the thing you are teaching me how to make. Take deep breaths and methodically lay out a minimum of 10 steps as you imagine me saying your name 50 times on a single exhale.

↪ don't forget to number each step.

1.

Congratulations, Teacher! You held it together! Your reward is teaching adults how to do the very same thing using the very same method.

Picture Book Club

A friend invited me to join a book club that would be reading Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in its entirety.

Much as I love the idea of being able to claim I've read all seven volumes of that madeleine-scented whopper, I ultimately realized it was more of a commitment than I was prepared to make (especially after seeing how a couple of personalities dominated during the virtual planning meeting I attended.)

I kept my FOMO in check by enjoying a bunch of other books I wouldn't have had time for, had I been scrambling to keep up with my required Proust reading each month. I get the vapors just thinking about that.

I like the idea of a book club that asks very little of its participants beyond showing up with a bottle of wine, a six-pack or snacks to share.

So, give me ten of your favorite picture books. You heard me. Those illustrated 32-pagers that Mommy, Daddy, or Teacher read aloud to Little You. Or that you enjoyed reading aloud to children of your acquaintance.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
(MORE) →	

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Imagine a discussion touching on the themes of each book. The artwork. The childhood memories each title sparks. The universal truths contained within. Don't get me started on my emotional response to the dedication page of *Walter the Farting Dog*. Pour me another glass of wine, if you want to see me cry. Circle the three titles with the greatest potential for sparking lively meaningful book club discussions.

Check to see if copies are available in the public library or from second hand sellers. Give your guests enough time to get their hands on each month's book. Because reading them will take barely any time at all.



+



Everyone's a Critic

One of the greatest gifts you can give a fellow small potato is public praise. I don't know any magical secrets for getting publicity, but I'm a freaking wizard when it comes to giving some away free.

We all know how great it feels to be on the receiving end, but going out of our way to perform these civic actions is also energizing, a tried and true mood elevator.

Want to get out of contributing to someone's Kickstarter, or donating to their Patreon? Amplify their events and projects and leave glowing unsolicited reviews in highly trafficked locations.

Nobody's stopping you from kicking in monetarily, too, but if it's a choice between the two, at the end of the day, I'd rather have the yummys.

The only rule is:

DON'T LIE.

Only praise things you dig. This way, it doesn't feel like a chore. It's the difference between giving someone a present because etiquette requires it, and impulsively springing for a present "just because" it reminds you of your friend and it feels good to surprise them in such a delightful manner.

Where to publish this praise?

On your own social media accounts. In your zine.

On message boards and other online forums frequented by music lovers, art lovers, book lovers, theater lovers, etc.

In the comments section of an existing review.

On the website of any online vendor where this work can be acquired. I bought an album on Bandcamp over a year ago and only just got around to reviewing it. That's okay. The artist will still benefit from it in some way. I don't support his Patreon, but I like to think I may have contributed to at least one future sale.

HOW TO MAKE IT IN HOLLYWOOD ~ Curtis Eller

I love the herky jerky old timey energy that informs this album. Throw a banjo, some old work boots, a 1930s house dress, the supporting cast of O Brother, Where Art Thou, a tough as hell tom cat, a portfolio of Walker Evans' WPA photographs, & my late, great aunts, Edith, Ruth, & Ina in a burlap sack & you know what would fight its way out? **THIS → ALBUM!!!**



Now it's your turn. If you do nothing else today, you will have done an unsuspecting fellow small potato a real solid.

What are you reviewing today?

What are 3 things you really love about this work?

1.

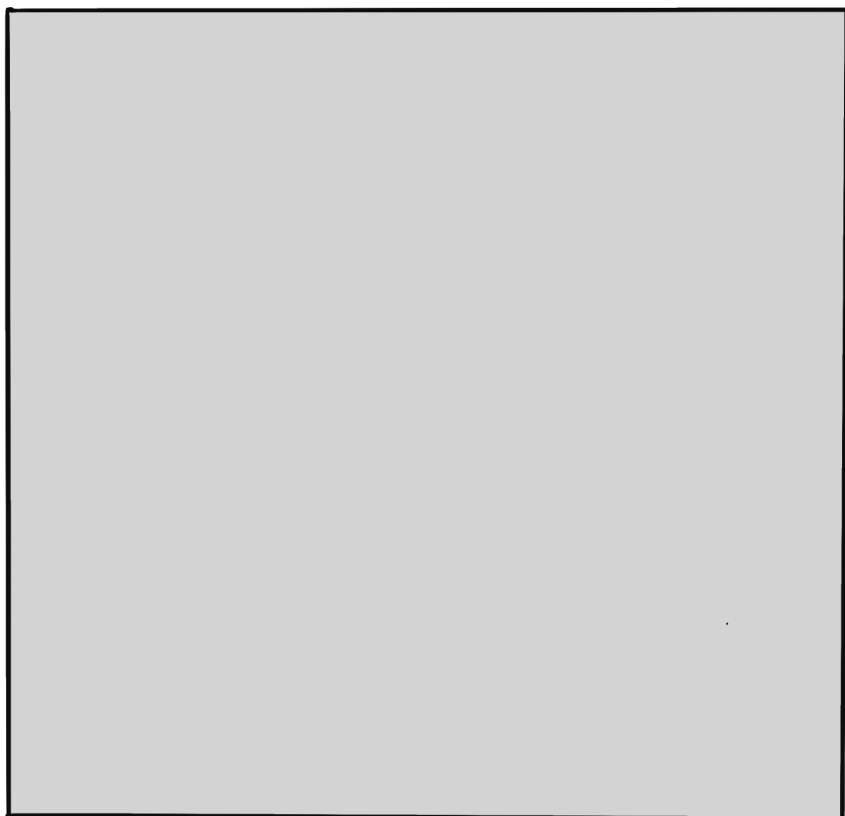
2.

3.

How does it make you feel?

What, if anything, would you compare it to?

Excellent. Take 10 minutes max to write your review on the next page.



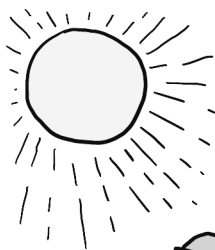
Where will you publish it?



I have an imperfect, Western understanding of karma, but I'm convinced good things will come your way as a result of this action.



Write and publish a review every day for 30 days. Store them all in one location. Keep track of each review's URL on a calendar, so you have a record of where you placed them. At the end of the 30 days, buy yourself a beer, or publish a monster cut of collected reviews as a PSA for anyone with similarly excellent taste.



REAPING

Is the end really drawing nigh with nary a peep about search engine optimization, agents, vertical marketing strategies, applying for non-profit status, forming an S-Corp, or identifying sources of corporate funding?

'Fraid so. It's not that I find those things boring (though, SPOILER: I ~~kind of~~ do.) Would you get blood from a stone!? Did I not put you on the road to a logo and a business card? What more would you have me do?

Truth be told, I can feel my telomeres dissolving any time I allow myself to get wrapped up in those business-y pursuits. Such intel as I have is probably obsolete by now, even the stuff I figured out how to do last year. If you need help with that end of things, I encourage you to turn to actual experts, whose passion for mailing list integrations rivals mine for papiér-mâché, puppets, and the public domain. These level-headed adults address those types of concerns with far more authority than I can pretend to muster. Many of them have written books on the subject. They have podcasts, websites, online classes . . . swing a cat. You'll hit a dozen of them in one blow.

I'm happier making art, and hopefully goading you into planting some seeds of your own. To that end...

Old Wine! New Bottles!

If you've read *Creative, Not Famous: The Small Potato Manifesto*, prepare for some déjà vu. That book ended with a feast of creative ideas, free for the taking, free for the making.

I'm still waiting for proof that some intrepid reader took up the gauntlet I threw and illustrated the first four paragraphs of the 5th chapter of John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* at the rate of one sentence or phrase per day. Fingers crossed!

The other ideas come compliments of *Creative, Not Famous'* other contributors, each of whom willingly released along-harbored, unacted-upon idea in the reservoir of the public good. Catch one or catch them all. Adapt as you see fit.

Take photos of men holding their wives' purses outside restrooms at state parks. (Pursue your own relationship to the binary when defining "men" and "wives.") I like the way some people are super casual, while others hold the purses away from themselves as if they might be infected.

—Moe Bowstern

Stage famous naval battles in public pools using rafts, canoes, or other floatation devices. Mock naval battles in flooded arenas like the Colosseum in Ancient Rome and nineteenth-century New York's Bowery Theatre were the action films of their day. Recreate the Battle of Trafalgar using red inner tubes for the British and blue inner tubes for the French. Or perhaps you could conjure the Battle of Midway using dinghies and drones—anything that can fit in a public pool to be viewed by an audience.

—Greg Kotis

Make a one-page comic about something that happened in your life this past week.

—MariNaomi

Retell Rumpelstiltskin thusly: The queen makes the same deal as before, but instead of sitting around and pining about what the guy's name might be, she gets off her throne and investigates. She finds out everything she can about her mysterious benefactor, and, through her investigation, comes to realize that here is a man, disfigured from birth, who has the talent to literally turn straw into gold, but lives in a hut in the middle of the woods. She comes to the realization that gold means nothing to the little man, he wants only to love and be loved by another living thing. Her father sold her to the king on false

pretenses, and the king only values the gold she can provide. The little man is not her enemy. In the end, she leaves the castle and goes to live with Rumpelstiltskin and they raise the child together.

—Todd Alcott

Compose a performance to be watched through hotel room door peepholes. Each audience member occupies a room without opening the door to the hallway, to observe the actions taking place in the hallway via the peephole.

—Karen Christopher

Watch all of Nicolas Cage's movies and then write an epic critical review zine of the Nic Cage cinematic universe. I got like halfway through his filmography—he's been in like ninety-four? Ninety-five??—but had to give up for mental health. Somebody please do this for me so I can read it.

—Anonymous Zinester No. 1

Here are two bands you could start. The first is Wax Lips, a punk rock band with songs about domestic life, such as "Rats Ate My Mint" and "Don't Take the Baby Outside." The other is Spaceface. Spaceface plays electronic instrumental covers of Charming Disaster's (my band) murder ballads and love songs. Perform incognito in silver unitards that cover your faces.

—Ellia Bisker

Document yourself staging increasingly elaborate stunt falls down the steps of public landmarks.

—Stephanie Summerville

Make colorful, cheery yard and window signs reading "Hate has a home here because my neighbors kicked it out" or "because it has to live somewhere" or "and it pays its rent on time." Sell 'em for a buck and proceeds go to, oh, I don't know, the ACLU? SPLC?

—Anonymous Writer-Performer

Write an opera libretto adaptation of Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus*. Yes, yes, I know there's been a recent TV version and I'm a huge fan of the 1947 Powell-Pressburger film, but I really think the story would be well-suited for the opera. All those great women's roles! All that suppressed sexuality! A critique of colonialism! Just think!

—Edward Thomas-Herrera

Take every shitty "Careless Whisper"-y sax solo from all the '80s songs, make a montage of them and then perform them all a cappella for a captive audience.

—Liz Mason

A root vegetable called the tiger nut that's native to North Africa can be whipped into a yummy and nutritious non dairy milkshake that's popular in Spain. Can someone open a gathering place in an American city that celebrates and elevates this? You could call it Horchatería Neoyorquina. I would show up.

—Rob Ackerman

Paint portraits and paintings for people as a way to celebrate them. Find images that remind you of who they are and paint them into existence. Make it a beautiful meditation, more about time than perfection.

—Shelton Lindsay

Film a fifteen-minute version of *King Lear* with one performer playing all parts except the title role, which should be played by a dog. Manipulate the dog's image to make it look like it's talking. A human can dub its lines. I still laugh at the idea of my late boxer, Linus, begging for a treat while nobly exclaiming "question not the need."

—Heather Riordan

Start a dating service for heteronormative people at their sexual peaks. Without actually looking it up, I think that's eighteen years old for men, thirty years old for women? Call it "Twin Peaks."

—J.T. Yost

Make catchy restaurant jingles for local restaurants that need a lift. Teach them to people as a sing-along. The media is all decentralized and different than it used to be when anyone could sing the theme song for their local department store, produce market, tire shop, or furniture store because they'd heard it so much on TV. Wouldn't it be cool if that could be a phenomenon that exists in this new world?

—Emmy Bean

Write a comedy screenplay in which President George W. Bush and Tony Blair find themselves crash-landed in Yapland, completely alone and without resources or money (while their doubles run their respective governments). A buddy movie in which the two leaders end up shedding their political masks, depending on each other, hating each other, then ultimately, cooperating in order to survive while learning to love each other and undergoing profound developmental growth. Nutty!

—Nick Balaban

Create a 4D holographic globe of the earth, a research tool that will allow users to access a geographical picture of the world at any time of their choosing, dating all the way back to the original cooling of the earth. Coordinate it to show the known proliferation of biological species, climate patterns, human migration, shifting

borders, animations of troop movements, and things like that. I honestly think all of the technology is in place for such an invention. It will just require a big investment of time, research, and multiple millions of dollars. All I know is that I want and need such a machine in my work *constantly*.

—Trav S.D.

Since every story has two sides to it, split an audience into two groups. Each group is assigned a different lead character to follow and the only dialogue or internal monologues they hear is that of their assigned character through headsets. This piece can be immersive or traditionally staged.

—Christine Schisano

Instead of the regular “Things I Want to Do Before I Die,” make a zine based on “Things I’ve Already Done Before I Die.” (Hit me up if you need submissions. I have five just sitting in an email folder from 2008.)

—Delaine Derry Green

Cover the floor with honey and sugar. Do a backbend in it. Allow it to crystallize into candied glass shards of body armor. Let the animals that love you best lick you free.

—J. Gonzalez-Blitz

Film an adaptation of my unpublished, nay, unwritten novel, *What Ducks Do*, about a group of AIDS patients in Australia who rob banks in duck masks to pay for their meds. Do not wait for me to write the novel. Maybe you can write the novel, too.

—Bob Laine

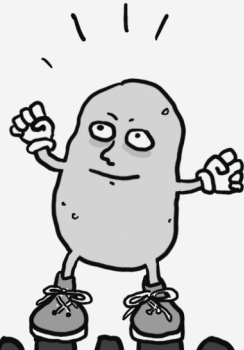
Here’s mine:

Shoot an unauthorized STAR WARS sequel or prequel on a hidden wildlife cam, using officially authorized costumes purchased at a deep discount the day after Halloween.



Shoot it on your neighbor’s wildlife cam without first seeking their permission.





THE SMALL POTATO MANIFESTO

WE RELISH THE FREEDOMS OF OUR RELATIVE SMALLNESS WITHOUT HOPE OF WEALTH. THE ONLY TIME WE GET IT WRONG IS WHEN WE AVOID DOIN' IT. WE CHOOSE WHEN TO BAIL, AREN'T SCARED TO FAIL & CROSS FINISH LINES WITH A MIGHTY YAWP. OUR LOINS ARE GIRDED FOR THE LONG HAUL. WE LIFT OTHERS UP & WELCOME SUPPORT FROM ALL QUARTERS. FIE ON THOSE WHO WOULD RATION OUR METAPHORS!

OUR GRIT DISTINGUISHES US FROM THE BIG BANANAS. OUR PARTICIPATION FORGES STRONG COMMUNITIES. WE ARE STILL LEARNING. WE WILL STRIVE TO GET THE WORD OUT. OUR WORK BELONGS TO THE AGES.

Acknowledgments

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A final blank canvas for personal use ➔

About the Author

Ayun Halliday is the Chief Primatologist of the long-running, award-winning zine, *The East Village Inky*, and a cofounder of Theater of the Apes. She is the author of eight books, including *Creative, Not Famous: The Small Potato Manifesto*. She created and hosts the ongoing Off-Off-Broadway variety show, *Necromancers of the Public Domain*. Ayun lives in New York City with her banjo-playing husband, playwright Greg Kotis. ayunhalliday.com