

The Generative Possibilities of Creative Research

Erica Berry



The Two-Headed Calf

by Laura Gilpin

Tomorrow when the farm boys find this
freak of nature, they will wrap his body
in newspaper and carry him to the museum.

But tonight he is alive and in the north
field with his mother. It is a perfect
summer evening: the moon rising over
the orchard, the wind in the grass. And
as he stares into the sky, there are
twice as many stars as usual.

- The beachcomber theory of creative research
- “High/lowbrow” omnivore
- What is YOUR “knowledge” lens? How might you embody the ‘lens’ of another character?
- Facts as the basis of metaphor

metals released, and cyanide-laced water poured through the dust to leach out the gold so that foreign corporations could reap a profit and people far away could ornament their bodies. The precious water of the desert was squandered, poisoned, then dumped into man-made lakes that killed the birds who landed in them. Knowing those mines made me hate gold.

The photographs came with an essay quoting another writer who'd worked for eight seasons in Antarctica. Jason C. Anthony wrote about the nutritional deficiencies common among sailors and polar explorers in the past and of their cause: "Without vitamin C, we cannot produce collagen, an essential component of bones, cartilage, tendons and other connective tissues. Collagen binds our wounds, but that binding is replaced continually throughout our lives. Thus in advanced scurvy, old wounds long thought healed will magically, painfully reappear."

You can read that as an insistence that we never get over anything, though it might make more sense as a reminder that though damage is not necessarily permanent, neither is repair. What is won or changed or fixed has to be maintained and protected or it can be lost. What goes forward can go backward. Efficiency says that grief should follow a road map and things should be gotten over and that then there should be that word that applies to wounds and minds both: *closure*. But time and pain are a more fluid, unpredictable business, expanding and contracting, closing and opening and changing.

You move toward or away from or around something that harmed you, or something or someone brings you back; that slip-page in time, as though the stairs you exit on have become a water-

From Rebecca Solnit's *Recollections of My Nonexistence*, Penguin Books 2021, page 236

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★ **11 REPTILES (fordham)**

Hi,

I am going through a difficult breakup and impulsively adopted 16 different types of reptiles over Craigslist. I have made a huge mistake. My roommates are furious. I have 1 ball python, 7 various geckos, a bearded dragon, and 2 red slider turtles.

They are all named "Amanda."

No rehoming fee.

- Location: fordham
- it's NOT ok to contact this poster with services or other commercial interests

Excerpts from this week's *Harper's Findings*, by Rafil Kroll-Zaidi.

<https://harpers.org/archive/2022/09/findings-september-2022/>

- Males of the orb-weaving spider *Philoponella prominens* spring away at speeds of up to eighty-eight centimeters per second to avoid being eaten after mating.
- A pregnant tortoise was found preserved in the ruins of Pompeii, and the bones of 350 frogs and toads were found near an Iron Age roundhouse at Bar Hill.
- The city revealed in the Mosul reservoir by a catastrophic drought may be the ruins of Zakhiku, which was destroyed by an earthquake.
- The ventral striatum is activated in the brains of couples who are asked to compliment each other, suggesting that the anticipation is itself rewarding

MINI WRITING EXERCISE: PICK ONE OF THESE FACTS AND START WRITING. ANY GENRE. WHERE DO YOU GO?



Remotest Island. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Tristan da Cunha, positioned in the South Atlantic, is home to the most remote community on Earth. It is one of the world's most pristine environments. Tourists only rarely visit the archipelago with its about 250 inhabitants. Some of the polar expedition ships, such as



“Tristan is obviously an underdeveloped nation, one badly in need of civilizing,” wrote a *New York Times* journalist. “But the natives don’t seem to realize it. They have a negative outlook.” Though England had just suffered one of the worst winters in history, Tristan da Cunha’s spokesperson told the journalist that his people were not leaving because of the weather. “In England,” he said, “it’s money, money, money, worry, worry, worry, all the time.”

The journalist was unsatisfied. “They don’t want to worry, worry, worry. . . . In their ignorance they think they’re happy on their secluded island. But how can they succeed in happiness without really trying?” he wrote. “They’ll never move upward and forward that way.”

Tristanian Conrad Glass is the author of the first book by an islander about Tristan da Cunha’s local history. His grandparents were among the many who elected to return, and in his book, he suggests that their choice was not a hard one. “They could not come to grips with having to lock their doors 24 hours a day,” he wrote. “With women and children having to be careful where they walked; living in fear that someone could be molested or even, murdered or raped.”

The islanders had, it seems, been willing to sacrifice many amenities of modern life: velvet-seated cinemas, the wet glow of supermarket produce, smooth two-lane highways. They had exchanged these things for a life without worry.

“On Worry,” published Fall 2018 in *The Colorado Review*

As a word, *worry* has its roots in the Old English *wyrgan*, “to kill.” The verb’s first definition in the Oxford English Dictionary is *to kill (a person or animal) by compressing the throat; to strangle*. And later, more specifically: *To seize by the throat with the teeth and tear or lacerate; to kill or injure by biting and shaking. Said e.g. of dogs or wolves attacking sheep*. With this usage, I wonder who the “worrier” would be—the wolf or the lamb.

“Such a dog am I / To worry, and not to flee,” wrote Tennyson in 1872. Both my wordy mind and my scaredy mind find thrill in those words. To worry, with Tennyson’s usage, is not an act of cowardice but an act of aggression. You bare your teeth when you worry. Someone bleeds.

Place as a Backdrop for Plot

From “Move Mountains: Activating Setting” by Ben Percy, *The Writer’s Chronicle* 12/2017

Place matters. That’s what so many people seem to have forgotten. Is it because they spend most of their time indoor or online—so that they’ve lost touch with their environment? Is it because every city contains the same neon-and-concrete gauntlet of Targets, Little Caesars, Subways, GreatClips—so that every place looks like every place else?

Someone once told me, “I want my work to feel like it could happen anywhere.” To which I responded, “Huh.” That’s like saying you want your character to seem like she could be anyone, Margaret Thatcher or Pippi Longstocking, or you want your story to seem like it could happen anytime, a thousand years ago or a thousand years in the future. Abstraction sucks. Good writing relies on the particulars...

It takes a long time to know a place. I’m not just talking about its geography. I mean its history, its culture, its politics, its myths. **Does Bigfoot or the Hodag lurk in its woods? Is Elvis Presley or Paul Bunyan its most famous citizen? Can you see the northern lights coloring the horizon? Did the river, once so full of chemical runoff, catch fire and burn for three days? Is there a hot air balloon festival every August? How do they pronounce the word *roof* or *bagel*?...**

When I ask people to tell me something interesting about where they live, they often tell me, “Nothing.” Maybe, if you’re from a place that isn’t a booming metropolis or a tourist destination, you think it’s an unworthy stage for fiction. **Look closer. Start listing off curiosities. Let’s say you’re in a small town in Iowa. How about the way, when the wind shifts just so, the air smells like the slaughterhouse twenty miles north? How about the murder-suicide that happened five years ago in the house across from the high school? How about the radioactive waste buried beneath the soccer fields? How about the tornadoes that unspool from the sky every spring and vacuum up the earth? How about last summer’s flood, the one so bad that people were canoeing down Main Street? How about the clouds stacked up like mountains and the fertilizer that runs off the cornfields and mucks up the rivers? How about the bluegrass band that made it big and tours internationally but still lives on a hobby farm outside town?...**

When a reader first picks up a story, they are like a coma patient—fluttering open their eyes in an unfamiliar world, wondering, *where am I, when am I, who am I?* The writer has an obligation to quickly and efficiently place the reader in the story.

**With person next to you, brainstorm a few CURIOSITIES about Bend, from past or present. Or maybe from your hometown, or Central Oregon more broadly. What makes Bend UNIQUE?
(Two minutes)**

Ramble around the ruins

Walk around ancient empires with Street View



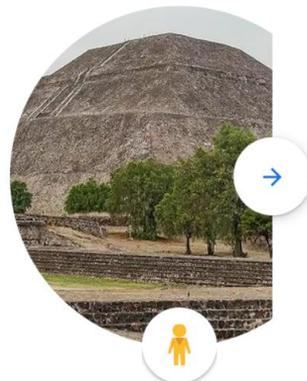
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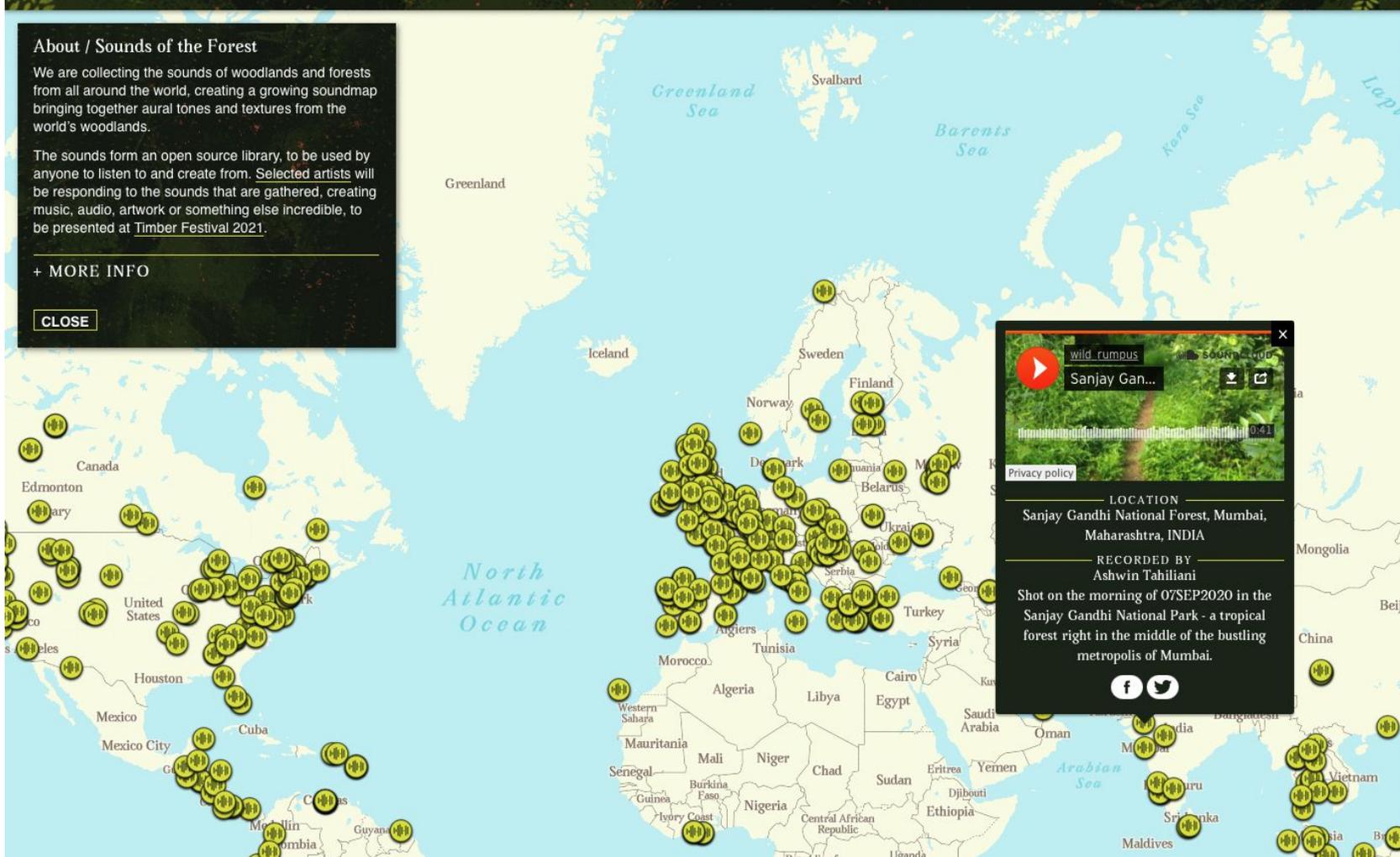
About / Sounds of the Forest

We are collecting the sounds of woodlands and forests from all around the world, creating a growing soundmap bringing together aural tones and textures from the world's woodlands.

The sounds form an open source library, to be used by anyone to listen to and create from. Selected artists will be responding to the sounds that are gathered, creating music, audio, artwork or something else incredible, to be presented at Timber Festival 2021.

+ MORE INFO

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LOCATION
Sanjay Gandhi National Forest, Mumbai,
Maharashtra, INDIA

RECORDED BY
Ashwin Tabiliani

Shot on the morning of 07SEP2020 in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park - a tropical forest right in the middle of the bustling metropolis of Mumbai.



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Open a new window somewhere in the world



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BOLIVIA 1968

EXPLORATION

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WRITING PROMPT:

THE POROUS SELF - WRITING THE BODY IN THE WORLD

Voice of Innocence vs. Voice of Experience

1. Think of a photo from your childhood or adolescence. Describe the image--what you remember about it or its circumstance--using "I." Think about writing in the **voice of innocence** - how did your body understand the moment at the time? Who was there? How did you feel about that time of your life?
2. Now step back, into the present day. Can you narrow what decade this photo happened in? What about year? Start listing **what defined the political/social/environmental world** around you. Research what else was happening during that year/period, perhaps using Wikipedia as a launching point. Go down rabbit holes. What were people wearing? What was on the TV/Radio? Celebrity scandals? What phrases did people say? Your scope can be as narrow or as wide as you want (things happening in the town you were born vs. the whole country). What were your parents and their friends talking or *not* talking about that point? It is likely some of what you are researching you would not have been aware of as a younger person--that's okay!
3. Write a second graf about the photo using the **voice of experience**, now padding the story with factual researched details. How might these details deepen character, tension, setting?

- “The researching and writing of a piece is always an experience of discovery, challenging what you think you know and what you feel you believe...If it isn’t, you’re in a rut, working too formulaically on subjects that are too comfy and safe,” said science writer David Quammen.
- “I sometimes think about writing,” wrote Brenda Miller, “as though I am standing on a porch decades ago, the heavy lid in my hand, rummaging and rummaging [in a box], until some unexpected thing winks at me, tells me to pick it up, examine it for what story it can tell.”