



INTRODUCTION TO NATURE WRITING FOR PERFORMANCE

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Nature writing is fiction or non-fiction prose or poetry about any element of the natural environment. This includes writing about the outdoors, animals, weather, environmental issues, or natural history. Nature writing is everywhere! A poem written about a weed growing in an inner city bus stop is just as much nature writing, as a poem written about a remote mountain. Nature writing can be political (Chekhov's Uncle Vanya contains a powerful screed about the damage that industrialization is having on Russian forests; a precursor to modern environmentalist nature writing) to the deeply personal, or both. It can be sad, funny, moving, dramatic, frightening. It can encompass huge events like tsunamis, to a gentle beach picnic. It can be whatever you want it to be.

This handout has been written to accompany two workshops I taught on "Nature Writing for Performance" at Custom House in Exeter, which were accompanied by nature walks. This handout is roughly split into two sections, one on writing nature-inspired monologues, the second on nature poetry.

MONOLOGUES

Theatre fundamentally exists to tell a story, and the two most important elements of story are character and conflict.

Basic playwriting structure goes like this: your main character (protagonist) exists in a certain environment. Then something happens (the Inciting Incident) to change that environment and act as a catalyst for the protagonist's journey to begin. Traditionally the inciting incident happens halfway through the first act, but it can happen earlier, or even before the start of the play. The protagonist has a need and/or want, and overcomes an increasing series of obstacles to try to get it. By the end of the play, they may or may not have achieved their need, but they will have been changed by the journey.

There are many different kinds of monologues, but monologues follow the same kind of structure as a play does: the character has been affected by some incident, has a want, and is overcoming obstacles to try to achieve this. When you write a monologue, try to think about what your character most wants, what incited them to start pursuing that want, and what's stopping them from getting it.



Another important question to ask yourself is: who is the character speaking to? Are they addressing another person, on the phone, performing a soliloquy (speaking to themselves), or addressing the audience directly? Why have they made the choice to speak in this way?

MONOLOGUE EXAMPLES

In Shakespeare's plays, the natural world is a liminal place outside of the confines and strictures of human society. Forests are places of enchantment where lovers fall in and out of love, while heaths are homes to witches and dangerous violent storms. King Lear contains possibly one of the best known and most powerful nature-inspired monologues in English theatre. In this speech, Lear wanders the heath in a violent storm, ranting about his ungrateful daughters who have turned against him. Shakespeare uses imagery evoking the violence of a storm to represent Lear's anger and confusion:

"LEAR: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!"

The following is a monologue from Caryl Churchill's surrealist dystopian play 'Far Away', which depicts a world so entrenched in war that even the natural world has taken sides:

"JOAN: Of course birds saw me, everyone saw me walking along but nobody knew why, I could have been on a mission, everyone's moving about and no one knows why, and in fact I killed two cats and a child under five so it wasn't that different from a mission, and I don't see why I can't have one day and then go back, I'll go on to the end after this. It wasn't so much the birds I was frightened of, it was the weather, the weather here's on the side of the Japanese. There were thunderstorms all through the mountains, I went through towns I hadn't been before. The rats are bleeding out of their mouths and ears, which is good, and so were the girls by the side of the road. It was tiring there because everything's been recruited, there were piles of bodies and if you stopped to find out there was one killed by coffee or one killed by pins, they were killed by heroin, petrol, chainsaws, hairspray, bleach, foxgloves, the smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn't serve. The Bolivians are working with gravity, that's a secret so as not to spread alarm. But we're getting further with noise and there's thousands dead of light in Madagascar. Who's going to mobilise darkness and silence? that's what I wondered in the night. By the third day I could hardly walk but I got down to the river. There was a camp of Chilean soldiers upstream but they hadn't seen me and fourteen black and white cows downstream having a drink so I knew I'd have to go straight across. But I didn't know whose side the river was on, it might help me swim or it might drown me. In the middle the current was running much faster, the water was brown, I didn't know if that meant anything. I stood on the bank a long time. But I knew it was my only way of getting here so at last I put one foot in the river. It was very cold but so far that was all. When you've just stepped in you can't tell what's going to happen. The water laps round your ankles in any case."

Finally, this extract from Lorraine Hansberry's 'A Raisin In The Sun' is more naturalistic but still devastating, as Beneatha's memory of treacherous winter acts as a metaphor for the family's and her own current problems.

"Beneatha: When I was very small we used to take our sleds out in the wintertime and the only hills we had were the ice covered stone steps of some houses down the street. And we used to fill them in with snow and make them smooth and slide down them all day...and it was very dangerous you know...far too steep...and sure enough one day a kid named Rufus came down too fast and hit the sidewalk...and we saw his face just split open right there in front of us...and I remember standing there looking at his bloody open face thinking that was the end of Rufus. But the ambulance came and they took him to the hospital and they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up...and the next time I saw Rufus he just had a little line down the middle of his face. I never got over that."

MONOLOGUE WRITING EXERCISE 1

The first exercise is going to be free writing. Choose one of the below prompts and then set a timer for five minutes. Start by writing down the prompt then keep writing from there until the timer goes off. Try not to stop writing! Don't overthink, just write whatever comes up.

"I was walking and I heard a noise."

"Finally, I felt safe."

"The funniest thing that happened to me..."

"I finally realised..."

"It started to rain and..."

"I've been waiting a long time to tell you this."

When you've finished writing, read back what you have written. Does anything jump out at you? Are there any lines you particularly like, or anything that surprises you? Did you end up telling a story, and if so was the narrator you, or someone else?

MONOLOGUE WRITING EXERCISE 2

Go outside (somewhere in the natural world like a park or by a river is best). Sit or stand quietly, and observe what is around you.

Write down: Five things you can see. Four things you can hear. Three things you can touch. Two things you can smell. And one thing you can (or hypothetically could) taste.

Pick one or two of the sensory elements you have just written down, and write down a full description of them. For example you might want to try to describe the feel of rough tree bark under your fingers, or the sound of rain, or the taste of an under-ripe blackberry plucked warm from a bush. Try to be as thorough and descriptive as possible. How does writing this make you feel? Can you visualise yourself touching a tree or eating blackberries while you write it? When you read your writing back, do you notice characters or stories within what you have written?

MONOLOGUE WRITING EXERCISE 3

Think of the place in nature you felt the most at peace, or the most safe. Where are you? How old are you? Why does this place make you feel safe? Pretend you are telling the story of how you found this place and how it makes you feel to someone else.

Now write that story down, but from the perspective of someone else. This could be a real person, a made up character, or even a non-human character. For example, if your safe place was in a forest, you might want to write from the perspective of a mighty oak who has watched the forest for hundreds of years. Be as creative as you like!

CHARACTER PROMPTS

Struggling to create a character from scratch? Here are some ideas for generating characters:

Go into an old graveyard and look at the names on the tombstones. Pick a name and try to imagine what kind of person she or he might have been like.

Go into a charity shop and pick up an item of clothing at random. Try to imagine what kind of person used to own that item. Did they buy it themselves? Was it a gift? Why did they give it away?

Read a newspaper (local newspapers are good for this): do any interesting headlines jump out at you? Without reading the article, imagine what kind of person could have inspired such a headline.

Sit in a public place (public transport is good for this) and discreetly people watch. See if you can guess where each person is going.

Characters can also be based on real people, either people you know or public figures. Pick your favourite or least favourite politician, for example.

MONOLOGUE WRITING EXERCISE 4

For this exercise, you can either use the character you have created in exercise #3, or create a new character from scratch. Choose a place in nature that inspires you, and put your character into that environment. Write a monologue of no longer than two pages exploring how they came to be there, what they want, and what they're doing to get it. This could be something very simple ("My daughter is on the beach and wants to enjoy a nice picnic") or more complex and wacky ("Boris Johnson got drunk and woke up in the lion pen at the zoo and wants to avoid getting ripped to shreds by lions").

POETRY

Poets have long been inspired by the natural world, with Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" not only one of the most famous nature poems, but possibly one of the most famous poems of all time. Poets use the nature to explore not only the world around them, but to act as metaphors for the human condition. Wordsworth used nature as metaphor for loneliness; Plath uses nature to evoke bodily imagery.

Here are a couple of my favourite nature poems to act as inspiration. As you can see they are all very different!

Blackberrying - Sylvia Plath

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.
Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.
I do not think the sea will appear at all.
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

The Swan - Mary Oliver

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air -
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music— like the rain pelting the trees— like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds -
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

The Orange - Wendy Cope

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—
The size of it made us all laugh.
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—
They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,
As ordinary things often do
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.
This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.
I did all the jobs on my list
And enjoyed them and had some time over.
I love you. I'm glad I exist.

Nature Poetry Writing Exercise #1

Pick a place or an item in nature that inspires you. Take a blank piece of paper, and write down all the words and phrases that come to mind when you look at or think about that thing/place. For example if I chose a poppy, I might write "red, flower, delicate, fragile, dancing in the wind, happy, mortal, opium, tissue paper-thin, summer fields, hot sunny days, wistful, childhood, picnic, clinging to a wall, decaying, torn, short-lived."

Carefully rip up the paper so each word or phrase is on a separate piece. (Do not do this outdoors.) Move the pieces of paper around and play with putting them in different orders. Do some of the words and phrases fit together? Is there a certain order that just feels right? Are there bits missing? Play around with the words (you can add more words if you need to) until you have a sequence of words and phrases that feel right. This is the basis of your poem!

Read it out loud. Does it flow well? Do you feel that anything is missing? Continue working on it until you have something you're happy with.

Nature Poetry Writing Exercise #2

Ideally do the first part of this exercise outdoors in a natural environment like a park.

Find an object from the natural world that most speaks to you. This could be a leaf, branch, flower, feather, pinecone, or even a snail (please take care not to damage or remove living things).

Take a blank piece of paper and write down all the words and phrases you can think of to describe that item.

Using your list of words and phrases, try to form them into a haiku. A haiku is a form of Japanese poetry that follows a strict formula: a first line of five syllables, a second line of seven syllables, and a third line of five syllables.

Once you have your haiku, think more about the object. You might like to think about how the object makes you feel, what the object represents, or you might want to think about the perspective of the object itself. Using these thoughts, write a second haiku expanding on the object and going beyond simple physical description.

Put the two haikus together: do they fit well? Do they tell a story?

Congratulations! You have written a poem.

As an example, this is the haiku I wrote the last time I did this exercise during a workshop, inspired by the object I picked up during our nature walk which was a thin stick covered in spikes. This poem has not been worked on or developed since; it's genuinely what I came up with in the space of the 15 minutes I gave participants for the exercise. I'm including it here both as an example, and to show that the cardinal rule of first drafts is this: "It doesn't need to be good, it just needs to be WORDS."

"Dry dead shadow thing / Prongs of your former self jut / Memory of life.
In the wood I stand / silent winter all is dead / Summer life has paused."

FINAL THOUGHTS

These are simply exercises designed to get the creative juices flowing, and make you feel more comfortable in starting to write. If you would like to write a piece to submit, it does not need to be based on any of these exercises. Write absolutely anything you like, as long as it's in some way related to nature. But write honestly and from the heart.

FURTHER RESOURCES

<https://royalcourttheatre.com/playwriting/writing-exercises/>

<https://www.writeaplay.co.uk/writing-resources/>

<https://www.elspethwilson.co.uk/blog/nature-writing-in-isolation-exercises-and-tips>

https://www.theatrefolk.com/distance_learning/Monologue%20Writing%20PLC%20Handout.pdf

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/how-to-write-a-monologue-with-examples>

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kathrynaalto/best-nature-books-written-by-women>