involved? How did native Alaskans think differently than this girl who grew up in Texas? Were some of these economic repercussions tied to (more interesting to me) environmental repercussions? Whose lives were affected? (People are always more interesting to me than corporations.) There's a beginning.

MELISSA GOLDTHWAITE (b. 1972)

This, Too, Is Research

CONSIDER THIS:

Melissa Goldthwaite teaches creative nonfiction, poetry, and composition at St. Joseph's University. When asked to comment on her own research processes and practices, she explained, "I research for many reasons: to learn, to add specificity and texture to my work, to understand other points of view, to find and question authority. Often, I research just so I don't embarrass myself. My most recent and consuming research interest is a qualitative and historical study of the place of the personal essay in composition studies."

Thinking of Goldthwaite's comments, consider the times you've researched to shore up your authority and to question authority. In her essay, Goldthwaite considers why individuals research. Even if you don't consider yourself inclined to research, try to make a list of your own before you read. Ask yourself what prompts researchers? Who researches more, those who write fiction and poetry or those who write essays and articles? Support your claims and compare them with the responses of your peers.

* * * *

Research is a creative process. And just like other creative processes, research gets hampered when we close down its possibilities, narrow too much our definitions.

—Bill Roorbach

I am writing about when I was fourteen years old, the first time I flew on an airplane. Somewhere between Boston and Monterey, probably in Chicago, we had a layover. I remember standing in an airport bathroom, washing my hands, and looking into the mirror above the sink. The effect was dizzying. The walls, both in front of and behind me, were lined with mirrors, and when I looked into the one in front of me, I saw an eternity of reflections, my own flight-weary face framed in mirror inside of mirror as far as I could see. Today, as I write these sentences, I begin to doubt my own memory, so I test it: get out a handheld mirror, stand with my back to the mirror above my dresser, hold the small mirror in front of me, and look in. When the angle is right, it works—reflection inside reflection. This is research.

Think of all the ways you research in a given day: reading a map for directions, studying labels at a grocery store, or asking a friend which professor you

should take next term. I line up boxes of cereal on the table while I'm eating breakfast to compare nutritional values, read online reviews before purchasing books, watch cooking shows on PBS to learn new recipes and techniques. Now consider all the kinds of research you do when you're writing—whether you're writing a critical paper or a creative piece. Perhaps you start in the library or with an Internet search to survey information on your topic, but it's not likely that you stop the process of research there. Writers, especially creative writers, do more than consult books and journals for quotations. We ourselves (our memories and experiences) and the world around us are sources, and it's likely that most anything we write will involve some form of research: research for inspiration, for details, for enriching memories, for learning.

Research for Inspiration

Researching the familiar is often inspiring. The world—newspaper headlines, overheard conversations, and even the local phone book—is a writer's muse, her best inspiration. Poet David Citino (2000) encourages writers to see intersections between themselves and what they read; he writes, "Writing poems from the news keeps poets in the world, where we belong. Everything is a text, we learn these days in theory classes. Of course, our reading—the way we let the world in—can include, in addition to newspapers and magazines, tabloid rags and *Scientific American*, catechisms and physics texts, billboards and gravestones."

No source is too trivial or beyond the writer's reach. Look, for instance, at newspaper headlines. Citino lists some: "Amish Busted for Buying Cocaine from Biker Gang"; "Man Charged After Corpse Is Left in Van at Strip Joint"; "Parish Priest in Italy Struck Dead by Easter Bell." And I keep a file of my own. Here's one of my personal favorites: "Wine Tasting for Homeless." When I read this headline in the *Columbus Dispatch* just before Christmas, I mistakenly thought the wine tasting was actually *for* the homeless and imagined lines of people in tattered winter coats, sipping wine from crystal glasses. The true story wasn't any less ironic: dinner (in addition to cheese and crudités) and jazz music followed by an auction of a fur coat, a diamond ring, a lease on a car from Byers Imports, among other high-ticket items—all in the name of helping the homeless. At times these newspaper gems are *found poems* complete with perfect details; many times, though, the headlines spark thoughts and can be transformed by imagination and experience into something far removed from the initial "source."

Research for creative writers—indeed, for any writer who cares about the richness and texture of her work—involves a great deal of freedom and imagination; often we're not constrained by context. A phrase from an overheard conversation on the bus may become a line in a poem; the outfit a woman in the grocery store is wearing may become inspiration for the description of a character in a novel; one line from an Emily Dickinson poem may spark the idea for an entire essay. Our sources are everywhere; we only need to be open to them. Fiction writer Juliet Williams, for instance, turns to the phone book for help with creating characters:

> Many times I can't think of jobs that might fit well with the idea of the character I have in mind, so I look through the index in the yellow pages to find something that seems to fit. If I don't know much about a particular occupation, the advertisements themselves help give me an idea of the basics of that work, and its language. Also, if I'm having trouble coming up with a name that fits my character, I use the regular phone book. Names go a long way to convey character to a reader. Often I'll have only an idea that I'd like my character's last name to start with an H, say, but I can't come up with something that doesn't sound too snooty or too bland. So I open the phone book to the H's and start browsing. Works every time.

Where else could you find such a choice of professions—from chimney sweep to soil tester—or names—Denny Dickensheets and Aladar Zipser? Like the phone book, many other items around the house can become sources too: cookbooks, music collections, old letters, even garbage. I once read a list poem about what a soon-to-be-married woman was throwing away. This makes me want to ask you: What's in your garbage? (Or medicine cabinet or pantry or closet?) What do those items say about you as a person? If a stranger were to find your credit card bill, what would she know about you or be able to interpret? The details of your life—and the lives of those around you—are rich sources; attention to those sources is an invaluable form of research.

RESEARCH FOR DETAILS

Several years ago, I was writing a poem about trillium, Dutchman's-breeches, and the fragility of relationships. As I was writing, a tree outside my office window captured my attention, found its way into the poem. I searched my *Peterson First Guide to Trees* to find the name. All I knew was that its leaves were heart-shaped, that the flowers were purplish pink, that it drew me in. *Redbud.* This detail, which I discovered through research and attention to my surroundings, has it own significance in the poem, but the field guide also made its way in as a point of contrast:

> [T]he redbud is in bloom, its pink
> flowers clusters bright before dull, heart
> leaves bud. We've not been talking.
> Flowers, I know, are easier to predict,
>
> And a field guide will tell
> what a lover can't: when flowers pass
> and fruits appear, when the season ends
> and it's time to give up or in.

When my students hand in poems or essays about trees or birds, I pen in the margins, What kind? Can you be more specific here? I want to picture a quaking aspen or Lombardy poplar. I want to hear the song of a yellow warbler or eastern meadowlark as I read. What I'm really asking them to do is research, to find out, to let the details change them and their writing. Sometimes an apparently

minor point—a name, date, color—can change the focus and impact of the piece. For one writer I know, finding out where a word came from helped reinforce the effect of her poem. Sandee McGlaun writes about a time when she researched the etymology of a word:

> I actually don't know what made me decide to look up the name of the flower—impatiens—that the woman in the poem was planting on a loved one's grave, but I did. Amazingly I found that it came from a Latin term meaning "not enduring" or "unable to endure," and so I incorporated the definition directly into the last line of the poem:
>
> no one told this grief:
>
> shovel lifting red clay, the itch
> of sweat, and a mound
> of lace-white *impatiens,*
> Latin, unable to endure.

Since language is the primary focus for writers, researching words (especially with the *Oxford English Dictionary,* which is now available on CD-ROM) can be illuminating for both writer and reader, making symbols more powerful and suggestive.

And while books (field guides, dictionaries, and textbooks) can be great assets to a writer, there are also other resources available for finding the perfect detail. If you're looking for the right color, for instance, head to the local home-improvement store and gather a collection of paint swatches or (to learn the difference between blue and cerulean) buy a Crayola 96 Big Box of crayons. Start searching online catalogs, not to buy products, but to get ideas for what tools a character might have in her garage or what books she might have on her shelf. Interview experts to learn what you don't already know. While doing research for a short story, McGlaun called a funeral home and spoke to a funeral director:

> I asked him what must have seemed, to him, grotesque and bizarre questions: How large would a person have to be to not fit into a regularly sized casket? How large to be too large to cremate? I of course prefaced the questions with the explanation that I was writing a short story, and, as it turned out, the man who took the call was thrilled to help me out. He had such a good sense of humor about it, in fact, that I even ended up using bits and pieces of our conversation as dialogue in the story.

Observations, interviews, and other forms of collecting data (even if that data is paint swatches or crayons) are all forms of research from which creative writers, all writers, can benefit. In addition, a wealth of information can be found in public records: court records, driving records, birth and death records, probate records, police records, property records, and so on. Many of these records are available online (see, for instance, <http://www.ancestry.com>) and contain the kinds of details that can be especially useful if you're writing

about a particular person or place. Although there are times when details come to us unbidden, there are plenty of other times when we need to search them out, and research—broadly conceived—is one of the best ways of doing so. Seeking details out often calls forth memories, bids the unbidden, leaving you with a wealth of information—some you'll use, some you'll set aside. Remember to give yourself time to sort through and process all you gather.

RESEARCH FOR ENRICHING (AND SUPPLEMENTING) MEMORIES

Often, creative writing grows out of the personal, and experience and memory are our primary sources. Yet we can enrich and supplement those sources in a variety of ways. Search the attic or junk drawers of your house (or your parents' house) to find old toys you once played with, your old lunch box, letters received a dozen years ago. Interview family members, read old journals, look through photo albums, find school papers and report cards, travel to your elementary school, drive past the house your mom grew up in: Discover the archives of your life.

Many times, those who base their writing on personal experience are accused of self-indulgence or "navel-gazing," but the truth is that writing personally—and doing it well—often requires looking outside of oneself for the material to create a self in and through language. In "Afterword: Writing 'The Greece Piece,'" a reflection on the process of writing her memoir *That Shining Place,* Simone Poirier-Bures (1999) discusses her use of memory and old letters (ones she had sent and received) as sources; she writes about the personas evident in the letters she sent and the self created by writing: "I was making a manuscript, but I was also making a self." The material we use to create and represent selves in writing need not come exclusively from memory. There are multiple sources that inform even the most personal writing, and sometimes we need those sources to make sense of the experience for ourselves and to interpret it for others.

The research that informs our writing is often a means of reconstructing our lives, helping us see our experiences within a broader context. And it's often in prologues, introductions, afterwords, and acknowledgment pages that we see a glimpse of the many kinds of research creative writers do. In *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place,* Terry Tempest Williams (1991) dedicates several pages of her acknowledgments to detailing the books, lecturers, friends, scientists, anthropologists, teachers, and others who informed her memoir. And in her prologue, she reflects beautifully on the ways physical and emotional landscapes are connected, reminding her reader of the ways her knowledge and experience of the natural world is vital to the personal story she's telling:

> I sit on the floor of my study with journals all around me. I open them and feathers fall from their pages, sand cracks their spines, and sprigs of sage pressed between passages of pain heighten my sense of smell—and I remember the country I come from and how it informs my life.

Williams comes from Utah and works as a naturalist at the Utah Museum of Natural History. The titles of each chapter of *Refuge* are the names of birds, and she charts the level of the Great Salt Lake even as she charts the events of her own life. In her memoir, Williams braids together stories of her mother's death from cancer, stories of the environment, stories of love and loss and healing.

What are the sources that inform your life and the events most memorable to you? I've studied old journals and phone bills to reconstruct the details of relationships, called family members to get names and anecdotes, and once even asked a friend to climb the mountain I was writing about (756 miles away) to make sure I'd gotten the names of the trees along a certain trail right. A student in the creative nonfiction class I'm teaching, Theresa Hammond, points to the importance of valuing the sources particular to your own life—those resources that are out of the ordinary. She spent the summer of 1998 in Jordan and Israel and researched the Israeli occupation, drawing from foreign newspapers and books in other languages. What unique collections or specialized knowledge do you have? How might you draw from those sources?

Maureen Stanton, writing a memoir that deals with a boyfriend's death from cancer, demonstrates the important role of research in her own work:

> I obtained Steve's medical records and then had to interpret them with a medical dictionary, and also went to the med school library to get various articles so that I understood the physiology of the experience, and could then translate that into lay language and hopefully, lyrical language. I'm also researching various forms of grieving (Tibetan, Bali, etc.), mythology (Native American mythology of the Sleeping Bear Dunes where I hiked many times, and others), have had to research holistic and alternative treatments for cancer, both legitimate and not, and fact check incidents from that time period (i.e., *Detroit Free Press* headlines, meteorological records for a long spell of sunless days I remembered).

Through the work of interpreting and researching, Stanton makes her own experience more accessible to others. She sets her individual story within a social and historical context, giving it a fullness by interpreting the sources around her through the lens of her personal experience. The connections she's able to make ground the memoir, make it more powerful.

While it may seem obvious that writers of creative nonfiction would use research to enrich and supplement memories, other writers do the same, adding specificity and nuance to their work. Poet Aimee Nezhukamatathil writes about her parents' homelands (India and Philippines), and since she's only visited, never lived in either of those places, her research expands her knowledge, even as it helps her present her own experiences more vividly to others; she writes:

> I search the Web, collect cookbooks, find zoology and biology books, and buy all kinds of field guides . . . to cull these specifics. If I can't remember what my grandmother cooked for me in her old copper pot (but I knew it had cardamom and a white flower's leaves) while I was sick with a cough, I'll look up home medicines, botanical guides, even cookbooks of southern India.

Recalling a memory of a lizard climbing the wall of her aunt's house in the Philippines, Nezhukamatathil writes, "I assume the reader has never had that experience, never seen that particular sheen of the lizard's blue (yes, blazing blue!) eyes and its pale tail the color of bread." From a reptile book of Asia, she's able to "gather what exactly that lizard was looking for to eat, where they live, what they do in the daytime. All those details seem too terribly important to leave out." As wonderful and full as many experiences and memories are, they can almost always be enhanced by searching for further details, and the discovery of those details has a dual effect—it makes the writing more powerful to others, and the writer and reader learn something in the process.

RESEARCH FOR LEARNING

These categories, these reasons for and strategies relating to research, certainly overlap and inform one another. What they have in common relates to our desire to learn, to see the world and ourselves in new and interesting ways—and to present that learning to others through whatever form we choose. Often the forms we use as creative writers—poems, stories, and essays—make research invisible, partly because such forms don't require traditional citations. However, many of the specifics and details that constitute creative writing are only available through research—through informal interviews, consulting books or newspapers, being aware of one's surroundings, reading personal journals, or searching one's memory for temporarily forgotten details.

Research can be vital to a writer's work at any stage of the writing process—providing inspiration and material for invention, even as it helps you revise your thinking about a particular topic or experience. Maureen Stanton, writing about her experience of working at a nuclear plant, found information on earthquakes and explosion-detecting devices, nuclear power plants (by accessing the USGS Web site), and how paint colors are named (by calling the manufacturer); she even researched and obtained a copy of the psychological test that was given to potential employees. "Through research," she writes, "I know more about the plant now than when I worked there." As this example demonstrates, research can add to—and sometimes change—what we already know. It can also help us take a closer look at what most people ignore.

According to creative nonfiction writer Kristina Emick, "If art is the act of paying attention, researching is one method of such tuning in, noticing, and exploring." And she accomplishes this tuning in by giving herself a focused topic, one she can explore in considerable detail, allowing the research to drive the essay. Research lends energy to her writing because she's always learning something new. Emick explains:

> In "Of Hangnails," I thought I'd give myself an assignment inspired by Montaigne and write a short piece on what seemed at first a fairly insignificant part of the body (Montaigne wrote *Of Thumbs,* so I was going a step further in triviality). I researched the OED to find out how the word *hangnail* developed, how

> it gets used in idioms, and how its meaning changed over time. I searched beauty books for information on what causes hangnails and how to take care of them. I researched newspapers to find out if hangnails had shown up in recent news (they had, and both instances ended up in the essay).

Emick includes the anecdotes she culled from the news: computer users in Los Angeles blaming hangnails on El Nino and a second grader in Colorado who struggled through a penmanship contest with a hangnail. Emick even researched herself, closely observing her own painful and stubborn hangnail. In doing so she realized the role the hangnail plays in her life, and she made the seemingly insignificant interesting to herself and her readers. Research became a kind of magnifying glass for Emick, who writes, "For just a moment, and not once since, the hangnail was the center of my world."

Go ahead: immerse yourself in research, allow your chosen topic to become, for a time, the center of your world. If you're writing about oranges, peel one, taste it, examine it, let the scent of it fill the room. If you remember running barefoot as a child, try it as an adult. Try it after a rainstorm. Frequent antique stores and yard sales. Borrow a fondue set. Read everything you can. You may not use all the information you gather, but the details you discover and the connections you make will surely expand your perspective, influence your thinking, and give you much to draw from.

RESEARCH FOR WRITING

Start writing things down. Carry a small notebook every place you go. Keep a commonplace book for quotations and observations. Start a file for your research. I have an old shoebox full of newspaper clippings, scraps of paper and restaurant napkins with ideas written on them, and countless ticket stubs from concerts, movies, the ballet. When I can't think of something to write, I dig through the shoebox for inspiration. It's full of details: I know from one ticket stub that I saw Savion Glover dance on Sunday, November 16, 1997. Seeing the ticket brings forth memories (how we sat in the second row, how my watch broke that night) and makes me want to look for the program from that evening's show. If I decide to write about that night, I'll look for Web sites, try to learn more about Glover and his dancing. If someone walks into my study, sees me on the floor, shoebox by my side, and asks what I'm doing, you know what I'll say: "Research."

"This, too, is research," I've said to myself throughout the process of writing this essay. My own process of research mirrors the advice I've given here, and all of the details and examples come from practicing the very strategies I encourage others to recognize. That is, for inspiration, I asked other writers for examples of the ways they do research. For details, I consulted a map to remind me how many miles it is from Columbus, Ohio, to Jaffrey, New Hampshire; I looked through my own file of newspaper clippings, checked out the phone book and field guides for particular names. I got out a box of crayons and went to the Crayola Web site <http://www.crayola.com/>. To supplement my memory, I looked through my own poems and essays for examples, stood in front of a mirror to test what I

thought I knew. And throughout the process, I've learned things I didn't know before. The examples used to illustrate these claims about research came from books, newspapers, experience, e-mails—from the many sources around me.

There are multiple sources surrounding you too. Take them in, allow them to circulate through you, transform those sources in your own writing—even as they transform you. In "I Stand Here Writing," Nancy Sommers (1993) explains her wish for her own students, one I share:

> If I could teach my students one lesson about writing it would be to see themselves as sources, as places from which ideas originate, to see themselves as Emerson's transparent eyeball, all they have read and experienced—the dictionaries of their lives—circulating through them.

Creative writing is not a solitary activity of the mind; rather, it is informed by the world around us, by the experiences we hold in our memory, by the connections we make, by the details and small treasures we find through research.